THE DAUGHTER OF MITHILA

A Play

Original Maithili book "MITHILAK BETI"

By

Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal

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Translated into English

by

Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

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Pallavi Prakashan
Berma/Nirmali

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The Daughter of Mithila is an English translation of Shri Jagdish Prasad Mandal's Maithili play *Mithilak Beti*. Centred on the question of dowry, the play places one family's moral decision within the wider social world of rural Mithila.

Through Karmanath's resolve to marry his educated daughter Champa without dowry, the drama opens into a broader reflection on family honour, women's education, village society, labour, economic change and the courage required to resist a corrupt social custom.

Rooted in local speech and rural experience, the play reaches beyond the concerns of any one region. It asks how society may move from hollow prestige and transactional values towards dignity, justice and humane relationships. This translation seeks to preserve the warmth, irony, social argument and ethical force of the original Maithili text.

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Dedication

To those who raise flower gardens
from Mithila's Vrindavan to the heaps of sand;
to those who bring the new dawn,
this play is dedicated.

- Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

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Preface

To translate a literary work is to invite one language to receive a world first imagined in another. In the case of The Daughter of Mithila, that world is unmistakably rooted in rural Mithila: its courtyards and darwajjas, fields and markets, kinship ties, forms of address, rituals, memories, humour and moral disputes. Yet the play does not ask to be read merely as a regional curiosity or an ethnographic record. Its local life opens directly onto questions that concern societies everywhere: What happens when marriage becomes a transaction? What value does education possess if it does not alter conduct? Can inherited customs be renewed without destroying cultural continuity? How may individuals resist an unjust practice when that practice is protected by family honour, caste, money and social fear?

Jagdish Prasad Mandal occupies a distinctive place in contemporary Maithili literature. The range of his writing is remarkable, but its deeper significance lies in his sustained attention to people whose labour, anxieties and intelligence are often left at the margins of literary representation. His creative world has grown out of a long intimacy with agrarian life, village institutions, social conflict and the moral language of ordinary people. The national recognition accorded to his writing, including the Sahitya Akademi Award, honours a major literary achievement; yet the truest measure of his contribution lies in the social world he has brought into

literature with remarkable continuity and conviction. As a dramatist, Mandal possesses a rare ability to transform social analysis into living dialogue. He does not lecture about the village from outside it. He allows the village to question itself through the voices of its own people.

The title The Daughter of Mithila carries the moral and imaginative centre of the play. In one of its most powerful recollections, Karmanath describes the helpless father who came in search of a marriage alliance for his daughter. The man invokes Sita, the daughter of Mithila, who could lift with her left hand the bow whose breaking made Rama a hero, and then asks how the same Mithila has fallen so low that no one will hold a daughter's hand without first receiving money. This contrast between remembered dignity and present degradation gives the drama its deepest charge. The daughter is not presented as a burden to be transferred from one household to another. She bears the strength of a civilisation, the promise of education and the right to shape a life of dignity. Dowry, therefore, appears not merely as a harmful custom, but as a betrayal of Mithila's own moral memory.

Dowry stands at the centre of the action, but Mandal refuses to isolate it from the social order that sustains it. In this play, dowry becomes the point at which patriarchy, property, caste, family prestige, education, salaried employment, agrarian decline and wasteful display meet. A son becomes an investment from which a family expects a return. A daughter's education is praised, yet her marriageability continues to be measured through money, ornaments and status. Families already weakened by flood, drought, debt or unemployment are compelled to spend beyond their means in order to protect a publicly enforced idea of honour. By placing these pressures

beside one another, the play asks a more difficult question than whether dowry is right or wrong. It asks what kind of society makes an obvious injustice appear normal, prudent and even respectable.

The five acts develop this question through a carefully widening social movement. Act One begins in Karmanath's official quarters, apparently distant from the village conflict that will later dominate the play. Chameli returns from the market angered by rising prices, and an ordinary domestic complaint opens into a discussion of hoarding, state authority, salaried life and economic insecurity. Her vivid account of a disorderly wedding party introduces the violence, waste, intoxication and hollow display that have entered marriage rituals. The conversation then moves through personal safety, caste and communal hostility, the limits of book learning and the need for knowledge of the world. Finally, Karmanath recounts the circumstances of his own marriage. His refusal to accept dowry arose not from abstract reformism, but from an encounter with a humiliated father and his decision to protect the dignity of a daughter. When he resolves to arrange Champa's marriage without dowry, he renews an ethical choice already tested in his own life.

Act Two moves to the darwajja of Somanath, Karmanath's ailing father. Here an older landed household confronts its own decline. Somanath remembers the dowry he failed to receive at Karmanath's marriage as a loss of family property. His resentment is inseparable from illness, ageing, reduced authority and the fear that the family's landholding is steadily disappearing. Asha challenges his calculations with moral clarity, while Nunu and Lalbabu reveal the habits of dependence, repeated land sales and hopes of unearned gain

that have weakened the household. Around their discussion gather stories of forced marriage, debt, fraudulent land transfers, the double sale of property, bribery and extravagant weddings. These are not incidental anecdotes. Together they reveal a society in which human relationships are increasingly interpreted through possession and exchange. Mandal does not turn Somanath into a simple villain. He reveals the anxiety beneath his greed and the insecurity beneath his attachment to prestige. The old order is economically exhausted, yet its values continue to govern the imagination.

Act Three brings the small farmer Shrichan to Vikas after a tomato crop grown from fraudulent seed has failed. What initially appears to be a separate episode is essential to the architecture of the play. Shrichan's loss means that his daughter's marriage must again be postponed. He cannot obtain institutional credit, village moneylenders have withdrawn, and the law offers him no practical protection because the receipt, seed packet and advertisement do not correspond. The global market enters the village through bright packaging and persuasive publicity, while the entire risk remains with the poor cultivator. Dowry is thus connected to agrarian vulnerability, commercial fraud and unequal access to justice. Mandal's social vision does not permit the marriage question to be separated from the economic life of the people who must bear its cost.

Vikas, the retired teacher, gives the play its most sustained language of ethical interpretation. He does more than assist Karmanath in finding a suitable family. He distinguishes a living village society from a caste network sustained mainly by ceremonial exchange. For him, society consists of those who extinguish a neighbour's fire, stand beside the sick and share

the burdens of daily life, irrespective of caste. His opposition to exclusionary feasts and dowry arises from the same principle: a custom must be judged by the quality of human relationships it creates. Vikas understands that goodness does not prevail merely because it is good. Good people must organise, act and build an alternative practice within the existing order. His role as a teacher therefore extends far beyond the classroom. He is a maker of social conscience, and through him Mandal defines the intellectual not by qualification or status, but by the courage to bring thought into conduct.

Act Four gives the drama another vital social history through Rambilas. Driven from the village by childhood poverty, he migrates first for seasonal agricultural labour and then to Calcutta, where an engineer becomes his mentor. Rambilas learns that labour is the poor person's capital. He advances from porter to factory worker and mechanic, saves his earnings, invests in vehicles and gradually achieves economic independence. His story is not a celebration of money for its own sake. Its turning point comes when he learns to regard money as a means rather than as the meaning of life. He returns to the village with a plan to invest his earnings in productive work, establish a mechanical workshop and create an independent livelihood for the next generation. Rambilas rises through labour while Karmanath's old landowning family declines through dependence and the sale of inherited property. Their eventual meeting on equal terms is not accidental; it is the social outcome of two contrasting histories.

In Act Five, these histories meet at Vikas's darwajja. The proposed marriage between Champa and Madan is founded not on inherited rank, dowry or financial transaction, but on

education, character, labour and a compatible understanding of life. It is significant that the young couple are not turned into a romantic spectacle. Madan remains outside the visible action, while Champa's presence is quiet but decisive. The drama is concerned less with courtship than with the social conditions under which a just union can become possible. When Rambilas declares that he seeks a good human being, not money, the sentence gathers the ethical movement of the entire play. The agreement to avoid wasteful display, complete the marriage simply, and allow time for the house, bus, workshop, lathe and computer to be put in place converts marriage from an occasion of consumption into the foundation of a shared productive future.

The conclusion is reformist without being culturally destructive. Vikas does not ask the families to abandon every inherited ritual. Customary courtesies, duragaman, kinship obligations and the blessings of elders retain their place. What is rejected is the corruption of custom through purchase, coercion and display. This distinction is crucial to Mandal's vision. The play does not set tradition and modernity against each other as absolute opposites. It respects cultural memory, family responsibility, local forms of knowledge and the continuity of Mithila's social life. At the same time, it welcomes women's education, computers, new skills, modern enterprise and the return of knowledge and capital to the village. Its true criterion is neither age nor novelty. A practice is worthy when it protects dignity, strengthens mutual responsibility and does not build one person's welfare upon another person's suffering.

Karmanath is the moral axis of the play, but he is not a conventional heroic reformer who already possesses every

answer. He is an administrative officer who understands the limits and compromises of official power. He questions society, yet he also learns from Chameli, his children, Asha, Vikas and Rambilas. His capacity to listen, remember and revise his judgement gives him dramatic credibility. Chameli's wit and practical intelligence keep the household discussion grounded in the real economy of food, prices, marriage and gender relations. Asha refuses to measure a son's worth by the dowry he might have brought. Madhuri's management of the home establishes domestic labour as practical knowledge rather than as an invisible obligation. Champa is educated, skilled in computers, capable of earning and deeply familiar with the cultural practices of Mithila. Her significance does not depend upon the number of speeches she delivers. She is at once an individual daughter and a measure of society's readiness to recognise women as full agents in their own lives.

The dramatic form of The Daughter of Mithila is equally important. Its action proceeds through conversation, recollection, argument, anecdote and the gradual shifting of judgement. Mandal discovers drama not in theatrical spectacle, but in the pressure of thought upon everyday life. A market complaint becomes a critique of political economy. A family memory becomes a moral vow. A failed crop exposes the vulnerability of the farmer. The history of a migrant labourer yields a philosophy of self-reliance. A marriage negotiation becomes a proposal for social reconstruction. The darwajja, repeatedly used as a setting, is especially significant. It is neither wholly private nor wholly public. It stands between household and village, at precisely the point where family decisions acquire public consequences. The play's spaces thus embody its movement from personal anxiety towards collective

responsibility.

Humour is essential to this dramaturgy. The repartee between Karmanath and Chameli, the sharpness of Asha's replies, the folk comparisons, proverbs and exaggerated wedding stories prevent the play from becoming a solemn social tract. Laughter creates intimacy, but it also exposes pretension. Mandal's rural images often contain an entire argument within a few words. They arise from roasted maize, torn cloth, the wheels of a cart, a rubber balloon, a flower garden, fields, wells, cattle, food and tools. Such images embody the intelligence of lived experience. They also reveal why the language of the play cannot be detached from the world that produced it.

This rootedness gives the play its wider relevance. Across cultures, marriage may become a means of displaying wealth or enforcing hierarchy. Education may improve status without transforming ethical behaviour. Farmers may bear the risks created by distant companies and misleading markets. Migrants may build cities while their own regions remain deprived of skills and investment. Women may be praised as bearers of culture while being denied economic and personal agency. The Daughter of Mithila addresses all these contradictions from a specific place, and that specificity is its strength. The more precisely it speaks from Mithila, the more clearly readers elsewhere can recognise corresponding structures within their own societies.

Translating the play required attention not only to meaning, but also to social relationships. Maithili forms of address indicate age, intimacy, kinship, respect and position with a precision that English cannot always reproduce in a

single word. Terms such as Babu, Bhai, Kaka, darwajja, katha, paan, bhang and duragaman carry cultural histories as well as dictionary meanings. Some have therefore been retained and explained in the glossary. To translate every such term into a familiar English equivalent would erase the social texture of the play; to retain too many without guidance would place an unnecessary burden upon the reader. I have tried to maintain a responsible balance between cultural fidelity and readability.

A similar balance was necessary in the dialogue. Literal syntax may preserve words while losing voice, humour and dramatic movement. Excessive domestication may make the English fluent at the cost of making Mithila disappear. My effort has been to produce natural British English while retaining the original images, the warmth and friction of family speech, the rhythm of oral narration and the ethical force of Mandal's argument. Proverbs and rural metaphors have been carried as closely as English allows, especially where an image is integral to a character's way of thinking. Where a literal rendering would obscure the intended meaning, I have preferred an idiomatic equivalent that preserves the dramatic function of the line.

No translation can reproduce every resonance of the original. It can, however, remain answerable to the people, places and values from which the original arises. I have approached this work as an act of attentive listening. My task has been to make the play available to English readers without turning its people into curiosities, smoothing over its social conflicts or weakening its moral challenge. I hope the translation will serve the stage as well as the page, and that directors, actors, students and general readers will hear in these dialogues the living cadence of a society thinking aloud.

At the heart of the play lies the possibility of another society taking shape within the existing one, a possibility articulated most clearly by Karmanath and Vikas. Social change does not begin here with proclamations. It begins when a father refuses to sell his son, when another refuses to purchase a husband for his daughter, when a teacher turns conviction into social practice, when labour becomes the basis of self-respect, and when education enables a woman to stand on her own feet. These acts do not abolish society; they renew it from within. Mandal's distinctive achievement is to show that a new moral order may first appear as a new sentence spoken in an old household and then become real through conduct.

I offer this translation in the hope that readers will enter The Daughter of Mithila not as distant observers, but as witnesses and interlocutors. The play asks each society to examine the price it places upon women, the purposes to which it puts education, the dignity it grants to labour and the courage with which it confronts injustice disguised as custom. The daughter of Mithila stands at the threshold of a future in which culture is not measured by ceremonial display, nor honour by money, but both by the freedom, equality and humanity made possible in everyday life.

- Dr. Ram Ashish Singh

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Act One

(Karmanath's quarters. Karmanath is in the outer room.)

Karmanath: (looking at the clock) It is a quarter to five. Why have the children not returned from school yet? Perhaps they have stopped somewhere on the way to look at something. Usually I too return from the office only after five, but today I came a little early. How could I not? On other days there is so much work that, by the time I finish it, it gets late. But today the employees' strike against rising prices shut down the office itself. Anyway, whatever it is, everyone should be back in a little while.

(He sits down on a chair and begins to read the newspaper.)

(Champa and Chameli enter. Both are carrying bags. One bag contains rice, pulses and vegetables; the other contains a tin of milk, a tin of tea leaves, small packets of spices, a packet of salt and a bottle of mustard oil.)

Chameli: Prices have gone through the roof. Good heavens, how can prices rise like this? (taking out the milk tin) Whatever you go to buy, the

price has shot up outrageously. How will people eat anything at all? The tin of milk I used to buy for twenty rupees cost twenty-eight today. And this tin of tea leaves, (showing the tin) which used to cost ten rupees, today cost twelve. It is not as if the price of only one or two things has gone up; the price of everything is touching the sky. And ours is a salaried life. Every single thing has to be bought with money. There is not one day in the year when we do not hear one demand or another from someone.

Karmanath: What a commotion you have stirred up! The way you go on talking, one would think you had gone mad. Everywhere one looks, there is talk of rising prices. Everyone says inflation has spread across the whole country. But tell me one thing. Where has this inflation come from? No one saw it arriving. If it came by air, sitting in an aeroplane from the sky, why was it not stopped at the airfield itself? If not that, and it came by water, why was it allowed to enter through the harbour? And if not even that, if it came by land, why was it not stopped at the border? But nothing of that kind happened. Then through which crack did this thief-like inflation creep in, that it covered such a huge country and so many people at once, like a blanket?

Chameli: You keep mixing salt and oil into everything and turning a simple matter into a long argument. Do you not understand even this much? Experts say that when production is high, prices come down, and when production is low, prices go up. That is how prices rise and fall. The radio says it all the time, and the newspapers too write that production has increased both in the fields and in the factories.

Karmanath: Then why has this inflation happened?

(Champa, holding her mother's arm and swaying slightly, speaks.)

Champa: Mother, what you have said is the plain surface of the matter, the very thing we too have learnt in high school. But beneath it lies the real point. The big moneyed traders buy the produce of the fields and the goods from the factories, and then hoard them in huge warehouses built both above the ground and below it. In this way the goods are cornered. When the market is emptied of goods, these traders bring them out little by little and sell them at higher prices.

Chameli: (her face lighting up) When they hide the goods in warehouses, do the people and the government not see it?

Champa: No! They conceal their dealings so carefully that even the law cannot detect them. They

load goods onto large ships and keep them anchored offshore. Not only that, even the goods stored in warehouses on land are tied up in such legal knots that one cannot tell whether they belong to this country or to some foreign country.

Chameli: (looking at Karmanath) Are you an officer or an idol of clay? Those thick law books you have kept there, are they meant only for insects to eat? When the law is in your hands, when there is the police and the jail, why have you left such people free to do as they please? Last time, only seven days ago, the same amount of goods that came for two hundred and fifty rupees cost three hundred today. You are a salaried man. Does your salary also rise like this?

Karmanath: You keep popping like maize in a hot pan! And yet you call me the chatterbox.

Chameli: The thief scolds the constable! You are the one glaring at me. Can you not even lift your eyes and see? You earn so much salary, yet this is the state of the house: the daughter has reached marriageable age, and there is not even a broken cowrie in hand. In your office there must be colleagues who earn less than you. What must be their condition? And those with smaller salaries often have more children too, so their families are larger.

(Sensing the seriousness of Chameli's words, Karmanath looks at her from head to foot three times and lets out a long breath.)

Karmanath: You have said a very fine thing. But I studied only to get a job. Today I realise that this was a mistake. Since I come from a family that had land, I should have studied matters related to farming. Year after year, so much wealth lies buried in the soil that even a quarter of it cannot be earned through service. Not only that, until we awaken the wealth of our own villages, whatever wealth comes from outside will come either as alms or as debt. Anyway, let that be. Yes, I was saying that my salary is not going to rise immediately. So, for the present, there are only two ways to get through the days. The first is this: the things we used to buy, buy a slightly lower grade of the same, or buy a little less of the same quality. If we do not do that, we shall be trapped. We shall fall into debt. Why are you swallowing so much bitterness over this? Has inflation come only for you and me, that you are breaking your own heart so much? Has it not come for everyone? And as for being an officer, that does not mean I can do whatever comes into my mind. Stopping inflation is hardly in the hands of people like us. The government I serve is itself responsible for inflation.

Chameli: Then why make such a show of authority for nothing?

Karmanath: (smiling) I make that show for the sake of my salary. You can see what is happening. When the sky itself has split open, how much can one stitch? When thunder rolls overhead, a man can only place his hands on his head and cry, “Save me, save me!” (to Champa) Child, keep the things inside.

Karmanath: Now tell me one thing. On other days you return from the market early in the morning. Why were you so late today?

Chameli: (confused) Did you not know that?

Karmanath: How will I understand unless you tell me? Am I God that I should hear without being told?

Chameli: It is about the day before yesterday. In the market, someone’s daughter was being married. The wedding party had come from Banaras. And what a wedding party it was! There were both men and women in it. A very good band party had also come. In that band there was a young cornet player. It seemed the first soft line of a moustache had only just begun to appear on his face.

Karmanath: (interrupting) What endless tale have you started now?

Chameli: Ah, Are you tired already? The real thing begins now. Just keep listening. That boy played beautifully. Along with the band party, the men and women of the wedding party, and the boys and girls of the market too, danced a great deal. And with that very cornet player, the daughter of the big merchant on the western side of the market road ran away.

Karmanath: Then her father did not have to spend even a paisa on her marriage!

Chameli: You always jump ahead like this. Listen. They say the boy has a job somewhere. The girl's parents tried hard to stop her, but she would not listen at all. She went away with him.

Karmanath: What kind of girl was she?

Chameli: People were saying that the girl studied in college and also learnt dancing. (with regret) Now just think how that girl's life will pass with that cornet player. On one side, the daughter of a rich and respectable house; on the other, a cornet player from a poor household.

Karmanath: (smiling) Why would life not pass well? One is a musician, the other a dancer. Together they will form a troupe and go from village to village performing.

(Meanwhile Fulesar and Juhi enter. Both have books in their hands.)

Karmanath: (to his son) Son, today is the twentieth. We shall go to the village on the first. In the

meantime, both of you, brother and sister, submit applications at your school and college and take leave for two months.

Fulesar: Father, from next month there will be a special class of one hour. That will be missed. So I feel I should stay here.

Karmanath: The thought is very good, but will it be right for you to stay alone?

Chameli: (interrupting, to her husband) You have started another matter now. You did not even finish one thing and have loaded another on top of it.

Karmanath: Shall I let your matter fall behind? Let me put my own matter back instead. Go on, speak.

Chameli: Yes, I was telling you about the wedding party. That was about the cornet player. Now listen to something even sharper.

Karmanath: (smiling) Add a little tamarind juice to it too.

Chameli: You are impossible. You never take what women say seriously.

Karmanath: What is the use of taking their words seriously if they bear no fruit?

Chameli: In understanding too, you men are barren. Men are sterile and then call women so! Have you seen the papaya tree? The male tree only flowers; it never bears fruit. But the female

tree bears as much fruit as it flowers. Yes, so listen to the second tale of that wedding party. The procession arrived and stopped at the bride’s door. Once the ritual welcome was over and the wedding party sat down, the groom’s father said that first they would drink liquor and dance, and only after that would any marriage rite or custom take place. But the bride’s side was not ready to accept this at all. A tug-of-war began between the wedding party and the hosts. Neither side was ready to step back. Meanwhile, the band kept thundering. Words flew from both sides; then it turned into grabbing and pushing. Once that began, wrestling, blows and fists followed.

Karmanath: (laughing) Excellent! Then they must have given one another quite a thrashing.

Chameli: You do not let me speak; you keep jumping in. While the scuffle was going on, they began pulling out the poles of the tent and striking one another with them. Many people had their heads split open. In the middle of this, the tent came crashing down. Everyone was trapped under it. No one could get out, just as fish get caught in a great net.

Karmanath: Were there only men there, or women too?

Chameli: Everyone was there. Who could see who had fallen where? After quite some time, the villagers removed the canopy. Those trapped beneath it emerged covered from head to foot in dust. And they had already been drinking heavily. Staggering and stumbling, the whole wedding party went and sat in the open. When they got a little air, twelve of the guests picked up their bags and suitcases and prepared to leave. The hosts began pleading at their feet, but no one was ready to stay.

Karmanath: Then the poor wedding guests did not have a pleasant night.

Chameli: Ah, was that all? All the pickpockets and street rogues who were there snatched the money, mobile phones and other things of the wedding guests and slipped away. It was night-time anyway.

Karmanath: Is that the end of the wedding party's adventures, or is there more?

Chameli: You are tired already? All right, let me tell you one more thing. The wedding party had brought so many crackers and fireworks that, the moment they reached the door, they made the place look like a battlefield. At that very time, the bride's maternal grandfather had gone to the latrine. One of the guests threw a big cracker against the wall of the latrine room. That cracker, perhaps a bomb,

made such a loud roaring sound that the poor old man began to run in terror. The door was shut. He panicked and ran straight into the wall. His head was split open, and a swelling rose from the injury. Overcome by pain, he collapsed, with his right leg caught in the latrine drain. After quite some time, when another man went to the latrine and found the door shut, he stood there for a while. Hearing and sensing nothing, he raised an alarm. Then the latch of the door was removed. As soon as the latch was opened, they saw the old man lying unconscious.

Karmanath: (laughing) Then along with the marriage, arrangements for a funeral almost began too.

Chameli: You never take another person's suffering seriously.

Karmanath: Do I dance at another person's happiness the way you do? Life's road lies between happiness and sorrow; to live, one must carry both. If a traveller becomes lost in happiness and shattered in sorrow, how will he complete the journey of life? Leave these worldly tales now. Let us talk about our own life. (Champa enters.) Good, Champa too has come.

Fulesar: What shall we do after taking leave for two months, Father?

Karmanath: We shall go to the village with the thought of arranging Champa's marriage. But

since you have said that your special classes will begin, you are thinking of staying here. The thought is good. But you must understand one thing: the first duty of every human being is to protect life. If you remain alive, only then will the world exist for you; otherwise there is nothing. From the point of view of study, your idea is good. But let me tell you one thing. I am an officer, so I have some experience of these matters. At this moment I am among my own family, so what I say does not carry the weight of an official statement. Had I been sitting in a government chair, or speaking before the public, I would not have said this.

Juhi: Father, for how long does a person remain a government official?

Karmanath: Child, the question you have asked has no simple answer. Right now we have to think about family matters, so I cannot answer your question properly. I shall explain it to you another day, at leisure. For now, let me give you a small indication. The situation in our country today is such that no one is safe. You hear every day of cases of kidnapping. What do you hear about such incidents? That kidnapping takes place for money, for ransom. That is true. But that is not the whole truth. Raise your eyes and look around, and you will understand that even those who have

no money are kidnapped. Not only that: a person with money may pay and save his life, but the one without money loses life itself.

Juhi: People do not say this.

Karmanath: People read newspapers and listen to the radio. So what the newspaper tells them, they tell others. But the real matter lies beyond that. A little of it is sometimes said by the radio and the newspaper, but most of it is not said. Yes, I was saying that when a person without money is kidnapped, his life is usually not saved. So one must understand that it is difficult to say who is ready to take whose life, to drink whose blood.

Karmanath: (to Fulesar) You may say, “You have never done anything wrong, nor do you do anything wrong now. Then why should anything happen to us?” But to understand the answer to that, you must look at one thing carefully. Just as night stands opposite day, poverty stands opposite wealth, and sorrow stands opposite happiness, similarly And when you look at it the other way round, you will see that just as day too stands opposite night, so wealth and happiness also have their own opposite side.

Juhi: Father, I could not understand what opposite means.

Karmanath: Child, right now I want to speak of another matter, so I cannot answer your question properly at this moment. But I understand the doubt that has arisen in your mind. For now, understand only this much: day and night are tied to nature, and so they will exist. They will remain opposite to each other. But wealth and poverty, happiness and sorrow are not like that.

Juhi: Father, what you have said does not satisfy my mind.

(Hearing Juhi, Karmanath thinks: If I cannot satisfy even a high-school student, how much harder must it be to satisfy an entire family or society? After reflecting for a while, he speaks.)

Karmanath: Child, there was a feast somewhere. No, not merely a feast. Five people from another country had come to a man's house. Being from another land, they were treated as great guests. The host, in whose house they had arrived, made fine arrangements for food and drink. Thinking of them as foreign guests, he invited ten of his own relatives as well. All the utensils for the meal, the plates, lotas, glasses, bowls and spoons, were of gold. After the eating and drinking were over, one of the host's own relatives stole a spoon and put it into his pocket. The host saw it. Once he saw it, he began to fear that perhaps the guests

had seen it too. But on the other side stood the honour of his own country and of his own kinsman. The poor man fell into a dilemma. Trembling within, he performed a little magic.

Juhi: He performed magic at mealtime?

Karmanath: Yes. Listen further. This was the magic he performed. He said, “I can see what object each person has in his pocket.” Everyone was astonished. Pointing towards his own relative, he said, “There is a spoon in his pocket.” The relative whose name he had taken flared up. Another person then put his hand into his pocket, took out the spoon and placed it on the table. So, child, the question you have asked is more difficult than that magic. Now remain quiet and let the matter move ahead.

Juhi: Brother’s question has remained only half answered.

Karmanath: Son, the times have created such a situation that no one feels safe. In truth, no one is safe. I spoke just now of kidnapping. There are many things of that kind. The people of one state look upon the people of another state as enemies. And as one behaves with an enemy, so they behave too. Not only that, one community looks upon another as an enemy. In the same way, people of one caste look upon people of another caste.

Juhi: You have tangled the matter so much that I have understood nothing.

Karmanath: Our country is divided into many states, many communities and hundreds of castes. On the surface everyone says that we are all people of one country, and therefore we must live together. But that is hardly what happens. People of one state beat the people of another state, violate the honour of their daughters and daughters-in-law, and try to snatch away the money they have earned. The same happens in many other forms.

Juhi: Even so, you have spoken in a tangled way.

(Karmanath fixes his eyes on Juhi for a moment and remains silent.)

Karmanath: Child, till now you have lived in towns and markets, so you have not seen these things. I speak with village people, do I not? Listen to what happens in the villages. A powerful man of one caste openly violates the honour of the daughters and daughters-in-law of another caste, especially of those who are weaker. In the same way, one community acts against another.

Fulesar: (letting out a long breath) Father, the matter you have unfolded today had never come before my eyes in this way.

Karmanath: If your eyes had not turned towards this matter till now, that too is no great fault. Until

now you have lived among books; how would you understand the ways of the world? But one thing must always be kept in mind with eyes and ears alert: life does not run on book-knowledge alone. For life, both kinds of knowledge are needed, the knowledge of books and the knowledge of the world outside.

Fulesar: Father, these days I see that from children in the lower schools to students in college, everyone knows everything about films and games, but knows almost nothing about their own family, society or lineage. For a long time I have felt like asking you about our family, but the routine of time has become so strange and disorderly that I never find the right moment to ask.

Karmanath: (smiling) I too have had this wish in my heart for the last ten years, because there is no certainty about this body. The human body is like an unbaked clay vessel made by a potter.

Chameli: (interrupting) Son, Fulesar, add one more thing to that. From the union of two families, two societies and two lineages, a new family comes into being. So it is necessary to know both sides.

Karmanath: (laughing) Yes, yes. Then let me first tell the tale of your family. A new human being is

born from the union of man and woman. Whatever else there is comes later, added from outside. So, for now, I shall say only this much. But I shall certainly tell the children how you and I were married.

Juhi: (clapping) Tell us that first, Father. Then tell us the rest.

Karmanath: (smiling, to his wife) I am telling the children, leaving you aside. So you will not raise any quarrel in the middle, will you?

Chameli: (her face brightening) Am I such a quarrelsome woman?

Karmanath: What do you think? It is about people like you that the saying goes: if shame did not hold you back, who knows what you might devour!

Chameli: Men are the lustful ones, yet they blame women.

Karmanath: Are men really so lustful?

Chameli: When I go to the market, I see it. The moment a man sees a woman, his loins begin to itch.

Karmanath: Are you a doctor that, after seeing the twitching, you begin to think of the medicine? How do you see the twitching?

Chameli: I have eyes. Should I hold them shut?

Karmanath: All right, I understand. You too want to hear the story of our marriage; listen then.

When I passed my B.A., Father began talking of my marriage. Every day two or four families from the girl's side would come. At that time I was living in Darbhanga. Here, Father had fixed the marriage somewhere. I came to know of it later. It was said that the bride's family was ready to give a substantial amount of wealth and twenty bighas of land as dowry. But the final word still rested with me. It was the month of Jeth. Here and there, the mango trees were heavy with fruit, as if clusters of mangoes had ripened all over them. After ten in the morning, the hot wind would begin to blow across the fields. It seemed as though sparks of fire were dancing over the land. After eating, I was in the room beside the front verandah. On both sides of the verandah, north and south, there were two rooms, and the middle space was open. In that open verandah, a long mat-bed had been spread. In the flood of 1987, that darwajja collapsed. Around noon, your Nana, your maternal grandfather, arrived, lay down flat on his back on that mat-bed, and fell asleep. When the bedding rustled under him, I too came out of the room. I saw a man lying there, both arms folded under his head, eyes closed. A little away from his head, he had placed a batua.

Juhi: What is a batua, Father?

Karmanath: (smiling) A batua is made of cloth. Tailors make it. It has little compartments, rather like small rooms. People tie it to the cord around their waist. They keep precious little things in it, and also money. I do not know what came over me; I sat there and picked up the batua to look at it. Ah, what a strange treasure a batua can be! Just as people decorate stools, doors and chests with coloured designs, this batua had a well drawn upon it. Around the well were five figures of women. One was lowering the bucket into the well. Another was holding the rope and pulling the bucket up. A third had a water-pot tucked under her arm. The remaining two stood on opposite sides of the well, arms flung out, quarrelling.

Fulesar: Do people quarrel at wells and ponds too?

Karmanath: (bursting into laughter) Oh yes, wells and ponds are almost the wrestling grounds of women. (looking towards his wife, shaking his head and laughing) Women may do less actual wrestling, but their tongues strike harder. Everyone knows the names of seven generations, and which abuse will reach which ancestor.

Chameli: (her face lighting up) Men dig wells and ponds, and women become the quarrelsome ones! (shaking her head) The shameless know no shame; once the stomach is full, the work

is done! If men remain good, how will women turn bad?

Fulesar: When you picked up the batua, did he not know?

Karmanath: (growing sad) How could he have known? He was not merely a man burnt by the sun. He was a traveller wounded by the blows of life. He was drowning in an unfathomable sea of worry and sorrow, and could see no way out.

Juhi: What was there in the batua?

Karmanath: (smiling) When I held the strings of the batua with both hands and opened it, all at once it gaped open with nine mouths. Each of the nine compartments held something of a different kind. In the first compartment there was a box of snuff. The moment I lifted it, a rich smell rose from it. The scent tempted me too; I felt like taking a pinch and putting it to my nose. But then I thought, if I take snuff, I shall certainly sneeze. And if I sneeze loudly and he opens his eyes, he will catch me at once. So I did not take the snuff.

Fulesar: You did not take it?

Karmanath: Yes, I did. Later. In the second compartment there were pieces of supari, pure Kala Pani supari, four of them, large and fine. In the third was a packet of betel leaves. In the fourth were two boxes of tobacco: one Harishankar black leaf, and the other Pan

Hundred Number yellow leaf. In the fifth were silver rupees. I did not look at them carefully, but they seemed to be few. In the sixth were cloves and cardamom. In the seventh, foreign tobacco. In the eighth, lime in a small container and powdered catechu in a bottle. And in the ninth, a nut-cutter made in Rampatti. After looking through all nine compartments, I took a little snuff from the snuff-box and held it between my fingers. I closed the batua, put it back, and then applied the snuff to my nose. The moment I did, I sneezed very loudly. As soon as I sneezed, he sprang up and sat. My nose was still tingling, so I kept rubbing it.

Fulesar: Did Nana say anything?

Karmanath: Neither did he say anything, nor did I ask him anything. The sight of his clothes and physical condition left me speechless. Many kinds of questions rose in my mind. He looked like some wayfarer who keeps walking without food or water, yet does not even think of stopping. After a long while, steadying my mind, I asked him, “Where do you live? I cannot quite recognise you.” Wiping the tears from his eyes, he said, “Son, you are still a child, so I shall not tell you everything about myself. But I will say this much: the bow whose breaking made Rama a hero was so light to Sita, the daughter of Mithila, that she

could lift it with her left hand while sweeping and plastering the floor. And today that same Mithila has fallen so low that no one will hold a daughter's hand without first taking money."

Fulesar: (startled) That was a very grave thing to say, Father.

(Tears come into Chameli's, Champa's and Juhi's eyes.)

Karmanath: My heart was scorched. My eyes grew heavy. My mouth closed. At one moment I looked at his face, at another at his clothes. Just then Father arrived. Your Nana said to Father, "Please lift the burden of a daughter born of good family and good conduct." At this, Father answered sharply, "What shall I do with family and conduct? Wash them and lick them? This is the age of money. Money is religion; money is duty. Tell me how much you are prepared to spend on your daughter."

As water turns into ice, so my tender heart began to harden. A dark storm rose within me. Yet I remained silent. Your Nana said, "My condition is not such that I can spend money. I hold your feet and request you: please relieve the burden of the daughter of a father as good as dead. I cannot satisfy your desire with wealth, but I shall certainly give you a girl who will serve your family like a maid." Hearing this, Father rose and went towards

the orchard. I felt as though I should tear my chest open and weep. A strange condition took hold of my mind. On one side was my father; on the other, a helpless girl.

Fulesar: Did Nana remain sitting there, or did he get up and leave?

Karmanath: He remained sitting. He did not even have the courage to rise. His face was turning ashen. He was breathing heavily again and again. Softly I asked him, “How much are you able to spend?” He said, “Son, since you have asked, I shall tell you my sorrow. We are two brothers. I have one elder brother. I did not study much, but I did go to the wrestling ground. When the division took place between the two brothers, he divided the fields and land, but he gave me none of the household utensils, ornaments, jewellery or cash. One day, in anger, I spoke to him. He too had his clever tricks and claims. He replied just as harshly that whatever was to be divided had been divided, and now he would give nothing more. I still had the heat of the wrestling ground in me. Right there at the darwajja I lifted him and struck five or seven slaps across his face.” Saying this, he placed both hands on his head and fell silent.

Fulesar: Why did he fall silent?

Karmanath: After a little while he began again. “Son, I never learnt trickery and manoeuvring in my life. He filed a case in court and brought the villagers over to his side. I was trapped from both ends. Strong men cut my crops, cut my bamboo and trees, and plucked my mangoes. When I went for court dates, one after another, lawyers and clerks cheated me. I lost the case. Because of that, I had to spend six months in jail. There was no misfortune I did not suffer. All property was destroyed. Defeated, my son ran away to Delhi. In such a situation, my daughter has reached marriageable age.”

Chameli: (wiping her tears) O God, may You never give anyone such days.

(Champa and Juhi look at their mother’s face, while Fulesar looks at his father.)

Fulesar: Did Grandfather turn back and come, or not?

Karmanath: He neither turned back and came, nor did he go anywhere else. He returned by the path behind the courtyard and sat down in the side verandah.

Fulesar: Why did he not come before them directly?

Karmanath: That he alone would know. But my mind began to turn away from him and to lean towards this man, my future father-in-law. I began thinking within myself: if I force the marriage now, without my father’s consent, a

terrible dispute will rise in the family. And if I refuse to marry, the honour of the darwajja will be ruined.

Juhi: What is the honour of the darwajja?

Karmanath: Child, the darwajja, the front space of the house, is the nose of the courtyard. The courtyard belongs to a particular household, but the darwajja changes into a public face. The courtyard is understood as the woman's space, the wife's space, while the darwajja is the outer threshold. A man's entry into someone's courtyard depends upon the woman of the house, but for the darwajja no such permission is needed. It remains open to everyone, always. The darwajja is the testing ground of men. As the men of a family are, so is the honour of its darwajja. Our forefathers understood this honour. That is why many of them kept this dignity raised upon a high step. Thousands of such men have lived who sent back a weeping person from their darwajja with a smile upon his face. That very thought came into my mind too.

Juhi: Why did this thought not come to Grandfather?

Karmanath: That he alone would know. But this much surely came into my mind: just as your Nana had come weeping, I would send him away smiling, whatever might happen in the family. Then another thought came to me: until low

thoughts are removed from a family, how can higher thoughts enter it? This is no magic or sorcery. It is conduct. It is joined directly to action and behaviour.

Fulesar: What did you do after that?

Karmanath: (serious) For a little while I thought silently. My own condition then was like the thin shade of a felled tree. So before marrying, I had first to establish my own existence. If I did not do that, if I married first and brought a bride home, her condition would be like that of an inexperienced bird caught in a hunter's net. So it was necessary first to take my own life into my own hands and then move forward. But how was that to happen? Thinking and turning it over in my mind, I decided that I must now leave this house and take up a job somewhere. The moment the thought of a job came to me, I said to him, "The tears that have fallen here today will surely bring deliverance."

Juhi: (laughing) Then Nana must have felt very happy?

Karmanath: He was a man of deep understanding. He said nothing. He wanted to hear the words from my mouth. Inside me, waves were rising like the waves of the sea. I felt like saying so much to him, so much that he might burst into laughter. I said to him, "Please go and eat." He replied, "Son, you are still young. You do not

understand the customs and conduct of our side. At this moment I am from the bride's side. How can I eat?" I felt like saying, "The gruel has burnt, but the ritual stiffness remains." I asked him thinking he must be hungry, and he began to recite scripture. But I remained quiet. Then I said, "At least drink a glass of water." The moment he heard the word water, he stirred and said, "Yes, that can be done."

Juhi: Did you not ask him to drink tea?

Karmanath: In our area, the custom of tea came only after 1935. When he agreed to drink water, I thought I should give him a full heart's worth of sherbet. Child, in our place children drank water in glasses; grown people drank from lotas. In our house there is a large lota which holds more than three litres of water. I filled that whole lota with sherbet and placed it before him. The moment he saw the lota, he began to laugh.

Juhi: Did he laugh on seeing the sherbet, or had his heart become happy?

Karmanath: That he alone would know. But from then on, the smile did not leave his face. He drank the whole lota of sherbet. After drinking it, he opened his batua, took out betel leaf, prepared a fine quid, placed it in his mouth,

and said, “Now my heart feels light.” The lighter his heart became, the more peace entered mine. Yet my heart also grew firmer. I said to him, “You will have to wait for a few days. But this much I tell you now: the trouble for which you have come will surely be removed.”

On hearing this, he began to speak. “We are people of Mithila, and therefore Maithils. Our ancestors understood the strength of women. For an entire lifetime a woman did not look upon the face of another man, even if she had become a child-widow. That is our inherited wealth. Yes, today, because of the distortions of society, some improper things have certainly entered. But the real facts should be understood.” We were still talking when, from the other side, Father began roaring and speaking all kinds of harsh words.

Fulesar: If Grandfather was speaking from the side verandah, why did he not come before them?

Karmanath: That he alone would know. But when your Nana rose to leave, I touched his feet. The moment I touched them, he opened his batua, placed five rupees in my hand, and said, “Son, Mithila has not yet run out of men of courage, nor will it ever do so. Everything now lies in the hands of young men like you. Take it forward somehow.” Saying this, he left.

Fulesar: What did you do?

Karmanath: Up to B.A., I had never failed in any class. So my desire to study had not diminished in the least. I thought, since I had to take up a job, I should at least sit once for the administrative examination. If I did not pass, I did not pass. I worked hard for two years and sat for the examination. I passed. After passing, I married. Now leave these old tales. At present we are all members of this family, so let us take one decision together.

Fulesar: (hesitant) We are children. What decision can we give? But we can certainly understand.

Karmanath: Son, the children of a family do not become mature all at once, nor are they all alike. The environment of every family is not the same. There is a great difference between the child of an educated family and the child of an uneducated family. In the same way, there is a great difference between the child of an advanced, prosperous family and that of a backward, poor family. There are many such reasons because of which the children of two families receive two kinds of environment. That is why they become different.

Chameli: When the parents stand firm like posts, why should children be dragged unnecessarily into family matters?

Karmanath: Why do you thrust your leg into every matter without understanding it? (changing his tone) Though your fault is not very great either, because your thinking follows one path, the path joined to the existing order. The world is strangely made. Try to understand it a little carefully. Just as the Equator lies in the middle of the world, and at equal distances to its north and south the climate may be similar but comes at opposite times, so it is with thought and with life. Since we have to think about Champa's marriage now, I shall not say more. A family belongs to all its members, not only to its guardian. Yes, it is true that the burden of family work rests upon the guardian; but that does not mean the children should not understand anything.

Fulesar: We were discussing Sister's marriage.

Karmanath: The very thing you have asked, son, is what I too wish to say. Among the three of you, Champa is the eldest. Her B.A. result has also come out. What I had in my mind has now ripened. In age too, she has completed eighteen and entered her nineteenth year; so it would be proper now to arrange her marriage. Since it is a matter of marriage talks and kinship, some time will certainly be needed.

Fulesar: We could have gone after a few days.

Karmanath: Look, I myself do not understand it all very well, because I have spent all my days outside. But I see that, leaving aside a few months, people marry off their sons and daughters in almost every month. Each month has its own quality. Among them, I think work done in Phagun is good. In the cold months there is too much cold; in the hot months, along with wind and storm, the sun too is sharp. So the days of Phagun are best.

(Hearing the discussion of Champa's marriage, different kinds of thoughts begin rising in everyone's mind. In Chameli's mind, daughter, son-in-law and family begin to dance together. In Champa's mind, there is the thought of a changing life. In Juhi's mind, the joy of her sister's marriage; in Fulesar's, the worries of his parents. In her happiness, Juhi begins to sing.)

Chameli: Does one feel no shame in discussing a daughter's marriage before the daughter herself?

Karmanath: What is there in that?

Chameli: Have we ever seen or heard such a thing till today? Or has some madness climbed into your head? Whatever comes into your mind, you go on saying it.

Karmanath: (smiling) What you understand as a good tradition may have been so when dowry, this

buying and selling, was not current in society. People were hardly educated then. But today's daughter is educated. She has begun to understand the question of her own life. She sees her parents' capacity and their service towards her. So she herself can think about her marriage. It should not be that because of the daughter the parents drown, or that the parents drown the daughter. As for mismatched marriages, they have continued because of exchange and transaction. Therefore, a daughter has to trust herself and take a step towards her next life. In a society where women's education was considered bad, how can boys and girls become equal? Then comes the matter of matching colour and appearance. Reducing marriage to colour and looks destroys the true form of the family. Beyond all this lies another coiled cobra that has yet to shed its skin: the hierarchy of clans within caste itself.

Fulesar: Good God! In a society where there are so many kinds of inequality, how can society move along one path? Leave society aside, how can even a family move? Man and woman, husband and wife, are the main parts of a family, like the two wheels of a cart. But if one wheel of the cart is strong and the other weak, how will the cart carry its proper load and move? The family too is like that.

Karmanath: Son, society and family, in this form, have become like an old cloth, torn and frayed so badly that mere stitching cannot serve. As long as people keep putting patches and scraps on it, it somehow goes on. But how long can such work continue? I shall not say more than this now, because at present the work lies upon our own head and we have to think about that.

Chameli: If you are thinking of Champa's marriage, when will you arrange the jewellery and ornaments?

Karmanath: (looking at Champa) What you say is true. But what will a person do who has no money?

Chameli: Will it look right if our daughter goes to her in-laws without a single ornament?

Karmanath: What you say is true. But what you call honour and dignity is only jewellery and ornaments. The longing that poor people carry for jewellery is their foolishness. Lift your eyes and look a little. Which family's parents have not given their daughter at least some jewellery? But in whose house does even a small ear-ornament remain now? So poor people should not nurse such longing at all.

Fulesar: Father, when the work is so tangled and nothing has been done till now, how will you complete it so soon?

Karmanath: I am going to the village with a resolve, and therefore the marriage will take place. How the work will be done is in my mind. My daughter is suited to her age and time; there is no reason why her marriage should not take place. (to Champa) Child, you are my eldest daughter. You are educated too. So I want to tell you a few things. Do not look towards the world; look towards yourself and towards your parents. I studied and became an administrative officer. But how much has your mother studied? Almost nothing. Yet how does the family run? I have brought you up to the point of passing B.A. You now have the capacity to work in a school, an office, a bank, or anywhere else. Then why should your life become a burden? Remove from your mind the thought that you cannot earn. As a man earns, so can you. I am your father. How could the thought of your harm ever enter my mind? Never.

Chameli: The fields and lands we have in the village never give hope of even a seer of grain. Your brothers keep selling the land and living on the proceeds. Sell that land and marry off the daughter.

Karmanath: What you say is true. But as long as Father is alive, would it be proper for me to sell it? Father is already bitter with me because of my marriage. If on top of that I do such a thing,

nothing will remain but an explosion in the family. Am I going to the village to marry off my daughter, or to set fire to the house?

Fulesar: (worried) A very serious task has come before us, Father.

Karmanath: (smiling) Son, you are still a child; that is why you do not know family and society properly. In a flower garden there are hundreds of kinds of flowers. But the person looking from the edge sees only the flowers at the edge. What kind of flower stands in the middle, how would he see that?

Fulesar: I could not understand what you mean, Father.

Karmanath: I gave you the example of a flower garden. The real matter is society. Society too is like a flower garden. Thousands of kinds of human beings live in it. Every person has his own life, his own thought. From that come his own resolve and purpose too. The best and the worst of people are hidden within society. Only the one who truly looks can see them. Not everyone. But let me tell you one thing: when you take a step to do any work, keep every limb of the body alert. The person whose every limb remains active can travel not only on a mud road, but by water and even through the air. Therefore, one should always

remain hopeful and keep taking steps forward. ❑

Act Two

(Somanath's darwajja. Somanath is reclining on the masnad. Asha and Nunu are seated on either side.)

Somanath: Son Nunu, where did you bring today's bhang from? It was certainly not from our own plants. After many days, I have drunk such fine, intoxicating bhang. Now make me a little tea. Then read out the letter from Karmanath that came the day before yesterday.

(Nunu goes to bring tea.)

(To his wife.)

Let me ask you something.

Asha: What?

Somanath: Think back a little to our wedding day. On that day, had we ever imagined that one day we too would become so weak and helpless?

Asha: (irritated) Your mind keeps wandering. The older you grow, the more your sense seems to crumble away. Can you not understand even this much? This is the law of the world: one is born, grows young, grows old and dies. Had it not been so, and had the people of earlier generations all remained alive, who would have cared for you or me?

(Nunu enters with tea. He gives one cup to Somanath and one to Asha.)

Somanath: (sipping tea) Even if a man belonged to seven hostile houses, if God gave him a son, may He give him one like Nunu. What sort of son is he who does not serve his father and mother? At times I feel like calling people from two villages, and our own kinsmen too, and telling them that when I die, Nunu alone should light my funeral pyre.

Asha: Why do you speak like that? What will people say if they hear you? When God has given you three sons, all of them are equal to us. Whichever son is destined to light the funeral pyre will do so. It is not something done merely for show. Parents have their own duty; sons and daughters have their own duty. Why beat your head uselessly over it?

Somanath: (annoyed) A son who, while his father is alive, cares little for him will build a golden temple after the father dies. Is that what you believe?

Asha: (snapping back) As though you built a golden temple for your own mother and father! You speak in that tone. As one performs one's deeds, so will the fruit be. If one dies after doing evil deeds, one will become a ghost or spirit and wander among trees and groves. If

one dies after good deeds, one will go to heaven. Do you not see that sinful souls, when they die, go on wandering in that way? When thirst strikes, they go to wells and break people's water-pots. When hunger strikes, they snatch food from travellers on the road and eat it. Whatever the Creator wrote for you, for me, or for anyone else on the sixth night after birth, that will certainly happen.

Somanath: (stung) Truly, there is no steadiness in a woman's words. A moment ago you said that the fruit depends on one's deeds, and in the next breath you say that whatever the Creator wrote on the sixth night will happen. Very well, tell me one thing. Does destiny apply only as long as we live, or even after death?

Asha: What is the matter with you? Do you think it will be written all over again after death? Or do you think what was written on the sixth night will continue after death too?

(Somanath takes a paan from the paan box and puts it into his mouth.)

Somanath: (pressing the paan under his cheek) Son Nunu, even if God does not give a man a whole herd of sons, but gives him just one like you, that one is better than the whole herd. What our forefathers said, that serving one's parents is the greatest duty of a son, was not a bad thing at all. Even now, if this world

continues to move, it is because of the duty of sons like you. Otherwise this world would have disappeared long ago. So many thieves, rogues, dishonest men and devils have multiplied that the earth could not remain steady even for a single day. All right, tell me one thing. Where did you bring today's bhang from?

Nunu: I do not know what kind of bhang it was today. Dinesh from the southern hamlet brought it from Darbhanga.

Somanath: Which Dinesh?

Nunu: Hira Kaka's son. He studies at Darbhanga College.

Somanath: (remembering something) Hiralal! I never saw him put bhang into his mouth. And his son has become such an expert!

Nunu: Ah, the way he drinks strong bhang, he also eats powerful tobacco. Who in the village has seen such stuff? We drink the bhang that grows here and there by itself in gardens and bushes. But he drinks pure cultivated bhang.

Somanath: Bhang too can be cultivated in special varieties?

Nunu: You are still singing the old song. You do not understand how far science has advanced. Or do you think science means only aeroplanes and rockets? When science advances, even things to eat and drink improve. You are

always saying that there is no match for flattened rice made from Basmati paddy. But the flattened rice now sold in the market can rival Basmati flattened rice itself.

Somanath: Leave the talk of flattened rice. You can see that for six months such an illness has crept into my body from within that I have forgotten all eating and drinking. What can illness not do? The barley which I never counted as grain has now become my food. "When the feet are tired, even the bed feels heavy; what load shall the trader carry now?" Leave food aside. Explain a little how cultivated bhang is grown.

Nunu: There is a very large company, with business worth crores and crores. That same company trades in bhang. It makes bhang juice, makes modak, and prepares all kinds of other products and sells them everywhere, in this country and abroad. The same company gives farmers advance expenses and hybrid seed for cultivating bhang. The farmers too earn more money from it than from other crops, and the labour is less. In field after field, farmers plant maize along the edges and grow bighas upon bighas of bhang in the middle. From that bhang, by mixing different ingredients, the company makes juice, modak and many other products.

Somanath: All right, now leave worldly talk. Take out the letter and read it.

(Nunu takes the letter from his pocket and begins to read it silently.)

Nunu: (after reading) Everything is well with elder brother. Champa has passed her B.A. He has written asking us to look for a groom for her marriage.

Somanath: (excited) Has he written to you two brothers, or to me?

Nunu: He has written to you.

Somanath: (more excited) See how shameless educated people can be. Do you remember or not? When he had passed his B.A., we raised the matter of his marriage.

(With regret.)

Oh, what a crushing loss that was! The property would have doubled. Twenty bighas of land were ready to be placed in the girl's lap. And who can say how much cash and jewellery besides? Tell me, what a heavy loss the family suffered!

Asha: You speak like a madman, as though Karmu belongs to no one in this house. As though neither you are anyone to him nor he is anyone to you. If the children did a small thing here or there, what of it? Why are you swallowing so much bitterness over that?

Somanath: Huh! For so many days the son taught me, and now you will teach me. Which way a jackal's tail bends, you alone will know! I earn

day and night, I run the household, and you think the world moves on its own.

(Growing worried.)

Now I have become completely helpless. My own life feels like a mountain. Honour, insult, respect, dignity, I have forgotten everything. As long as I live, I keep cawing like a crow.

(With regret.)

What honour this house once had, what prestige, what authority; everything is gone! God did protect me in one way, that He took away all worldly pleasures. He brought me down to barley gruel and kept me there. Otherwise, even God knows what condition I would have been in.

(Growing serious.)

All right, you tell me. A son may be earning a good amount, may he not? But what does he give his parents?

Asha: (twisting her mouth) There is not a trace of shame in you. When Karmu started his job and began sending five hundred rupees every month, after only three months you wrote to him saying that with five hundred rupees you could only pay the interest on the debt. And now, shameless as a burnt brick, you say that he gives no money. If five hundred rupees seemed like a mere scrap to you, you should

have written, “Son, do not send it month by month; send it once in six months, so that it may serve some purpose.”

Somanath: You are very wise, are you? Tell me one thing. Is it the dignity of parents to arrange the marriage and later ceremonies of their sons and daughters, or should everyone simply marry on their own?

Asha: If Karmu married on his own, what terrible crime did he commit? Did he lose his caste? He simply did not take dowry, that is all. What of it? Had the bride’s side filled your treasury, everything would have been excellent; because they did not, everything became bad!

Somanath: What do you say, son Nunu? Do you find your mother’s words right or wrong?

Nunu: Father, Mother belongs to the old way of thinking, so her view is not entirely wrong either. But the age has changed now. The age of money has arrived. People regard only the person who has money as human, and society gives honour and prestige to that person alone. So there was certainly such a loss to the family that a large sum slipped out of our hands. But Mother, the time for the test has now come too. Karmu Bhaiya did not take dowry; very good. But now he has to marry off his own daughter, does he not?

Somanath: (with relief) Yes, yes, well said, son. "You will know, Mian, when the time comes to beat the cotton." At least that time is now arriving. God has done well by making me helpless. I shall neither do anything nor bear the blame.

Asha: Son Nunu, you say the age of money has arrived, and therefore every work will be done through money. But do you understand one thing? A human being will remain a human being. Whatever age may come or go, the one who does good will do good, and the one who does evil will do evil. You father and son blame that son, but do you understand his virtues too? Leave aside our family; in the whole village, how many are there like our Karmanath? The village is full of people, but how many equal him?

Somanath: You may dance holding your officer son, but I was Somanath and shall remain Somanath. I need a son like Nunu. Whatever I say, whenever I say it, he remains more faithful than a servant.

Asha: I am not like you, that I should raise a finger against a son like Karmanath. We have two daughters and, leaving Karmanath aside, two other sons too. Why did not even one of them reach high school? Because of that very son, the granddaughter has passed B.A. You do not consider him human. If you do not

consider him human, will he consider you human?

Somanath: (calming down) What use have I now for becoming human? I am stuck on the road to death. When my time comes, I shall take God's name and depart.

(Lalbabu enters.)

Somanath: Where do you disappear all day, Lalbabu?

Lalbabu: Ah, what shall I say, Father! Whose face did I see when I got up today, that I have not even had my meal on time? In the morning I went towards the square and saw a crowd of people in a commotion. People from another village and people of our own village were all in a stir. I too slipped over there and saw that the outsiders were speaking sharply, while our villagers stood with their heads bent, only listening. My mind grew restless. I asked one man, "Brother, what is the matter that you are all speaking so sharply? Where are you all headed in such a large group?" He said, "A student from our village, that is, from Kharboni, studies in Darbhanga. He lives in a lodge. In the same lodge, five or seven boys from Pipraghat also live. Living together, they all know one another. The students from Pipraghat lured the boy from our village to their village and forcibly married him to a girl."

Somanath: Without asking the boy's father?

Lalbabu: Yes. That is why the boy's relatives gathered and were going to Pipraghat. The boy's cousin said that the boy's marriage had been settled at Satgachhia for ten lakh rupees. Out of that, one lakh had already been given in advance, and the remaining amount was to be paid four days before the wedding.

Somanath: Once the boy and girl are married, what will the boy's people do by going there?

Lalbabu: What will they do! They were so enraged that they looked ready to tear the bride's house apart. And you ask what they will do.

Somanath: How many people from Kharboni were there?

Lalbabu: I did not count them, but by a rough estimate there must have been forty or fifty.

Nunu: The people of Kharboni will certainly receive a thrashing today. The people of Pipraghat are such fierce ruffians that the Kharboni men will learn a lesson today. And among them there is also the gang of a ferocious leader whose only work is this.

Somanath: (putting both hands on his head) I do not know what kind of age has come upon us.

Nunu: Father, ask God to give you ten more years of life. Then you will see what all happens.

Somanath: What happened after that?

Lalbabu: Everyone had tea and paan, and then set off northwards in a rage. When they had moved a little ahead from the square, I too slipped away and came to Ratna's tea shop. I had hardly sat down properly at the tea shop when Surja arrived. I saw his face twisted with anger, but he said nothing. I asked him, "Suruj, your mind seems greatly upset." He said, "What shall I say, Lalbabu? Everyone in this world has become dishonest. Whom can one call one's own?" I asked, "What has happened?" He said, "My wife's brother fell into debt during his daughter's marriage. He had no money, and he could not pay the moneylender. In anger, the moneylender filed a case against him. My wife's brother also tried to be clever. He transferred all his land in the name of his maternal cousin, merely as a sham. But that fellow turned out to be such a cheat that he swallowed up all the land dishonestly. Now a message has come from there, asking me to go and settle the matter."

Nunu: Whom can anyone trust? The poor man thought him his own and made a false transfer of the land, and that fellow became such a greedy rogue that he cheated him out of everything.

Lalbabu: Till now I have told you about others. Now listen to my own matter. After drinking tea, as

soon as I started towards home, Gangaai stopped me on the way.

Somanath: (eagerly) What? What did Gangaai say?

Lalbabu: He began saying, "Your Mohan has cut my throat." The moment I heard the phrase "cut my throat", I was startled. All kinds of thoughts began rising in my mind. I asked him to explain clearly. Weeping, he said, "I had bought fifteen kathas of land from him. I had paid ten thousand rupees per katha. It must have been three or four months ago. I ploughed the field and sowed maize. The day before yesterday Munesara came and said, 'Ganga Bhai, divide the maize with me.' I was shocked. I said, 'When I have bought the field, why should I give you a share?' As soon as he heard this, he took the deed out of his pocket and showed it to me. His registry was two months earlier than mine."

Somanath: (bewildered) Mohan's nature and conduct are not like that.

Nunu: Can one understand a person's character just by looking at his face and ears? That grand marriage he performed for his daughter, where did all that money come from? He brought the tent alone from Patna for one lakh rupees. It is said the cook took twenty-five thousand, and on top of that, food and drink for four hundred members of the

wedding party. Even then, more food was left over than the guests had eaten.

Lalbabu: And had he not counted out seven lakh rupees too?

Somanath: Would someone paying seven lakh rupees choose an ordinary groom?

Nunu: Did he bring a groom, or did he bring wealth? One hundred and fifty bighas of land stand behind that boy.

Somanath: All right, leave worldly matters. Did you give Lalbabu Karmanath's letter to see?

Nunu: No, not yet.

(Nunu hands the letter to Lalbabu. Lalbabu begins to read it.)

Lalbabu: It was the fifteenth day of the month. I was at the square, at Gulten's paan shop. He was saying, "Master, from today I have increased the price of a paan leaf by one rupee, because all the ingredients for paan have become costly." Just then a man came on a bicycle. He parked the bicycle in front of the shop and asked Gulten, "Do you have polythene?" Gulten smiled. Then the man asked the name of the company. The paan seller nodded. He handed him a polythene packet weighing about a kilo. That traveller too took out a fifty-rupee note and gave it to the shopkeeper. Standing there, he drank the contents of the polythene packet in one gulp. After drinking it,

he asked the shopkeeper, "Which way is Karmanath Babu's house from here?" My ears pricked up at once.

Somanath: Did you ask him anything?

Lalbabu: No. He began speaking on his own. He said, "Karmanath Babu and my elder brother live in the same place. My elder brother has earned and piled up wealth. In our village there is not a single person who has spent so much on a daughter's marriage."

Nunu: As though our Karmanath Bhaiya has kept no money! Since we are his kinsmen, he has hidden it from us. Everyone knows how to keep money. Some will rattle like a drum, and some will keep it pressed down quietly.

Somanath: You have all understood the matter of the letter. Now the four of us should think what is to be done.

Nunu: When both of you, Father and Mother, are here, what can we say?

Somanath: I am trapped like one caught between a snake and a shrew. I can neither say yes nor say no. I cannot say yes because, if truth be told, my mind turned away from Karmanath on the very day he married on his own. The goddess of wealth, whom we could see before our eyes, turned away. Well, he married, and that was that. But even after earning, he never gave a single paisa. Yet he is my son. And now

he has to marry off his daughter. A daughter does not belong only to her mother and father; she belongs to everyone.

Asha: Your own mind never stays steady. At one moment you say one thing, and at the next another. You yourself tell me: when Karmu was sending five hundred rupees every month by money order, you wrote to him that with five hundred rupees you could only pay the interest on the debt. And today you say he never gave a single paisa. The poor man has a job; whatever salary he gets, he must run his life within that. You look at others and think Karmu must be the same. That would be true only if he too took bribes and twisted things like them. Does everyone in the world follow the same path?

Somanath: Will you be the one to understand the ways of people today? Who thinks money is bitter? A man's salary may be one measure, but his side income is seven measures.

Lalbabu: Mother, one friend of Bhaiya has earned and piled up wealth. Both of them do the same work.

Asha: Son, you people tell me one thing. The property whose benefit you all enjoy, does he have no share in it? You people are eating his share. Has he ever asked you anything? Is there not

even this much water in your eyes? If he cannot gather the expense for his daughter's marriage, will he not take from this property?

Lalbabu: I must have something left before I can give it. Do you not see that year after year we sell land, and only then does the work somehow continue? There is neither an old tree left in the orchard nor a field left in the lowland. All that remains is the house-site and the land in front of the house. Even that cannot really be cultivated by our own strength. The sharecroppers too are such that they give us only a small portion of the produce. But what can one say to those poor people either? In some years there is drought; in some years flood. The crop either dries up or drowns.

Asha: I see that too. But will the proper welfare of someone's life stop because of drought and flood? Sons and daughters must be married. Houses and courtyards must be built. Children's education and expenses in illness will certainly come. And we are a family bound to ten sets of relations. Can you abandon all of them? Why is it called a family otherwise?

Somanath: What is the use of making so much noise, son? In a dark house, everything looks like snakes. When Karmanath comes and speaks of the marriage, then we shall ask him, "Son, how will you manage the work?" You can see that here even those who have almost

nothing, who work as daily labourers, spend one or two lakh rupees on a daughter's marriage. Our family is not like that. Even if you cut and trim the marriage as much as possible, ten lakh rupees will certainly be spent. And our society is so poor in understanding that it cannot grasp even this: when parents have already spent so much on educating their daughter, how can anyone ask them for money? No one feels even that shame. People will give grand speeches, but when the time for action comes, they become meaner than the meanest. How can one live in such a mean society?

Voice from inside: Grandmother, Grandmother, Karmanath Kaka has arrived.

(Asha rises and goes inside. The bustle and voices of Karmanath's family arriving are heard within.)

Nunu: Father, we two brothers are younger, and you are still alive. So whatever Bhaiya says, we shall do.

Somanath: (shaking his head) One thought keeps rising in my mind.

Nunu: What is that?

Somanath: What if Karmanath claims his own money and tells us to sell the land? If that happens, both the ground beneath our hands and the ground beneath our feet will go.

Lalbabu: Then what shall we do?

Somanath: I shall tell you what to do. You two brothers are now grown up and mature. If you do not think now, when will you think? I have already become helpless; I am a traveller ready to depart. How long will you rely on me? As long as I am destined to live you see my face. The day it ends, I shall get up and go.

(Karmanath enters. He bows to his father. Lalbabu and Nunu bow to Karmanath.)

Somanath: (blessing him) May you prosper. Son, my condition has become so worthless now that you may consider me dead. For six months the doctors have forbidden almost everything. I live on barley gruel, and because of that I am still standing. Otherwise I would have gone long ago. After examining my whole body, the doctor said that the disease will not be uprooted, so I must keep to careful food and water. I felt like arranging the worship of one and a quarter lakh Mahadevas and seeing what comes of that too. But I keep saying today or tomorrow, and even that has not yet been done. Is everyone in the family well and happy?

Karmanath: Yes. Everyone is well. Two months ago I too received a promotion. Champa has completed her B.A. She got very good marks. Fulesar is studying for his B.A., and Juhi is in matriculation.

Somanath: (laughing) If you have been promoted, your salary must have increased too?

Karmanath: Yes. It increased by two hundred and fifty rupees a month. But what change can that bring in life?

Somanath: (surprised) What do you mean?

Karmanath: The salary is fixed according to the family and the level of the post. Even then, income tax keeps it under control. As the salary rises, income tax also rises. Not only that, house rent, water and electricity expenses also go up. Somehow, by turning things this way and that, I keep the family alive. The expense of three students has been there from the beginning. I too have developed the habit of reading and writing, and that also costs money. On top of that, the society in which I live also demands expenses. All these expenses come out of the salary itself. By the time the month has properly begun, I have no money left. Call it a year or a month, there is not a single day when something or other is not owed to someone. In that way, somehow, I live.

Somanath: I see people in jobs smaller than yours who earn and build towers of wealth. How do they do it?

Karmanath: (smiling) As disease enters the body, disease also enters the mind. What you have

just said is a disease of the mind. But it is not true that everyone’s body or mind is diseased.

Lalbabu: Bhaiya, there is a man from the western village, perhaps you know him, who has earned and piled up wealth.

Karmanath: I know him too. He is one batch junior to me. Earlier he often came to my quarters, and I too used to visit his place. But gradually the relationship faded. Now neither do I go to his place, nor does he come to mine. If we happen to meet somewhere on the road, then we meet.

Lalbabu: Bhaiya, you had written a letter regarding Champa’s marriage, and now you yourself have come. Just as Champa is your daughter, she is our niece too. Whatever is to be done, we shall create no obstruction.

Karmanath: For now I too have come with the purpose of marriage, so it is not good to bring in second and third matters. But I shall certainly say one thing: time is changing very fast, and therefore we too must change with time. If we do not change, we shall be trapped. Father has grown old; no one knows how many days he has. But you two brothers are still young. The family will certainly grow; it will not become smaller. Therefore expenses too will certainly grow. You will have to meet them

yourselves. Even now, when your family is small, land is being sold. When expenses increase, how will you manage?

Lalbabu: Yes, what you say is true. But employment is not in our hands. Then what are we to do?

Karmanath: A salaried job is not the sole measure of life. There are many other ways to earn a living. Those who truly wish to work leave even jobs and establish their own work.

Lalbabu: (nodding) You are right, Bhaiya. When I turn back and look, I feel that the time till now has passed in mere scattering and waste. Now I understand that to live, everyone has to labour.

Karmanath: Some other day, at leisure, I shall explain this properly. Right now I too am caught in work, so first this work must be settled.

Nunu: Bhaiya, a daughter’s marriage has become the heaviest work of a family. And for those who lack money, it has become difficult to save honour and dignity. The most astonishing thing in society is that however educated a daughter may be, however full of modesty, virtue and beauty, today she has no value.

Karmanath: (firmly) Son, Champa’s marriage will certainly take place. My own deepest conscience tells me this. As far as dowry is concerned, I shall not give even a single paisa.

Yes, the customary courtesies that are practically followed will have to be fulfilled.

Nunu: If you do not give dowry, the work will be difficult.

Karmanath: The society in which you see dowry as custom is a rotten society. I spit upon that society. But that is not the only society. Beyond that society there is another society, a human society. In that society no one harms another, nor does anyone wish harm upon another. Champa's marriage will take place in that very society. Therefore I am not worried about dowry. Since I have lived away from society all these days, I am certainly a little inexperienced in its ways. ❑

Act Three

(Vikas is on the darwajja, weaving a chair with plastic cord.)

Shrichan: (from inside) Vikas Bhai? O Vikas Bhai?

(Vikas leaves the chair-weaving. Startled, he begins to look around on all sides.)

Vikas: Who is it?

(Again he looks around, startled.)

Shrichan: (entering, with a spade on his shoulder and a hand-hoe in his hand) Vikas Bhai. O Vikas Bhai?

Vikas: Shrichan! Why are you so disturbed? What has happened?

Shrichan: Everything is ruined! I have suffered a crushing loss!

Vikas: (bewildered) What has been ruined? Steady your mind and speak.

Shrichan: It would have been better if one son had died than this. But when a full, flourishing crop is ruined, two months of labour sink into the ground.

Vikas: Why do you let such inauspicious words come from your mouth?

(Shrichan puts down the spade and the hand-hoe, places both hands upon his head and stands as if about to weep.)

Shrichan: What shall I say, Bhai! God too is a strange butcher and cheat. Why do people call themselves His children? If He is God, should He not look upon everyone with the same eyes? But where does He do that? Even in Him there is partiality. On one person He is pleased and gives in plenty; on another He brings down a blunt sickle and cuts the neck.

Vikas: You are speaking in such a way that I understand nothing. Explain it properly and speak plainly.

Shrichan: What shall I open out and say, Bhai? You understand everything, yet you ask as if you know nothing.

Vikas: I am not pretending to ask. You are speaking as though I am still wandering in the dark. It is you who keep saying, "You understand everything." Say it plainly.

Shrichan: You know that I am neither a proper landholder nor a hired labourer. I have fourteen or fifteen kathas of land. I farm that, and when I have no work of my own, I go out for wage labour. I cultivate vegetables on five or seven kathas. From that we eat a little ourselves and sell a little for two or four

rupees. I had planted tomatoes on four kathas, and all of it has rotted. It is as though someone had secretly sprinkled salt over it.

Vikas: If your tomatoes have rotted, why have you come telling me?

Shrichan: Come, let us go to Madhubani for a while.

Vikas: Why?

Shrichan: We shall file a case against that seed company. I do not understand the twists and turns of courts and law, so I shall take you with me. We shall teach those seed-sellers who they are dealing with. Until I put them in jail, my mind will not rest. Even if the case costs me another two thousand rupees, so be it!

Vikas: First tell me the whole matter properly.

Shrichan: It was about two months ago. On the morning of the market day, I went to Jhanjharpur haat to buy seed. I do have a shop I know well. But some evil thought must have climbed upon my head; instead of going to that shop, I moved towards the haat.

Vikas: Why did you not go to your familiar shop?

Shrichan: What shall I say, Bhai? I was still a little short of the market when I heard a loud horn blaring out an advertisement for seeds. They were advertising an American company at full volume. It was as though a string had been tied to me. As happens when one's eyes fall upon the eyes of a python, the sound of that

horn caught hold of my mind. I saw nothing else. Walking on, I too reached there. On top of a very large motor vehicle, two loudspeakers had been fixed, one facing each side. Beside the vehicle they had also set up a large seed shop. All around that shop people sat looking at packets of seed. Two men sat on either side and sold the seeds. There were packets from five grams to one kilo. On each packet, according to the seed inside, bright, colourful pictures were printed.

Vikas: How did you know it was an American company?

Shrichan: They were announcing it through the loudspeaker, and the shopkeepers too were saying the same.

Vikas: What did the shopkeepers look like?

Shrichan: Ah, what shall I say, Bhai! All three looked alike. All three had a milky-white complexion, brass-coloured eyes and maize-silk hair.

Vikas: (uneasy) Milky-white complexion, brass-coloured eyes and maize-silk hair?

Shrichan: You did not understand, Bhai. The colour of all three was like pure milk. You know the foam that forms when cream is churned? That kind of dazzling white. That is why I said milky-white. Our eyes are so beautifully black, but the eyes of those three looked like brass. That is why I said brass-coloured eyes. And their

hair looked like the silk on the top of a maize cob. They did not have beautiful black hair like ours.

Vikas: (laughing) Were all three women, or men?

Shrichan: Bhai, I cannot say that properly. Their faces and ears, even their age, looked the same. Had there been moustaches or beards, I would have known. None of the three had any. Whether they had none at all, or had shaved them off, I cannot say.

Vikas: There were no moustaches or beards, but could you not tell from the hair on their heads?

Shrichan: What shall I say, Bhai? Our hair is manly. Women's hair is long. Theirs was neither like that.

Vikas: Then what kind was it?

Shrichan: Neither woman-like nor man-like. Neither fit to be called a bob-cut, nor fit to be tied into a knot. There was no question of a bun. It was simply turned straight backwards, hanging down to the neck.

Vikas: Were they wearing sindoor?

Shrichan: Oh! Not one of them had sindoor.

Vikas: What were their eyes like?

Shrichan: I told you, they looked like brass. But among them, one person's eyes kept moving everywhere, like a cat's.

Vikas: (smiling) Ah, Shrichan! You have grown old and yet remained such a simpleton that you could not even decide whether they were women or men.

Shrichan: Bhai, what shall I say! All three wore trousers of the same kind and shirts of the same colour. Only in the sound of their speech was there some difference. The voices of two sounded a little heavy, and one voice was thin.

Vikas: The one with the thin voice, what was that one like?

Shrichan: Good God! That one's eyes flashed and danced like a cat's eyes. But the person spoke so fast that there was no question of understanding properly, nor could I hear it clearly. I just kept looking at that face.

Vikas: (laughing) Was that person looking at you or at someone else?

Shrichan: From one side to the other, when those eyes danced, they did look at me too. But mostly they looked towards the people with money. I had gone with only three hundred rupees, and even that I had kept tucked away at my waist. I had thought I would buy seed worth one hundred and household things worth two hundred. After all, people do not go to the market every day.

Vikas: Did they give you a receipt for the seed you bought?

Shrichan: Yes.

(He takes the receipt and the empty seed box from his pocket and holds them out to Vikas.)

Here, these are the two things.

Vikas: (matching what is written on the receipt and on the packet) Ah, they cheated you completely. The receipt says one thing and the packet says another. On top of that, you say they were advertising an American company. All three things turn out to be different.

Shrichan: (disheartened) Then there can be no case?

Vikas: No. If you file a case on this evidence, you yourself will be trapped. You may have to go to jail instead.

Shrichan: They cheated me of three hundred rupees, and I shall be the one to go to jail!

Vikas: The law has its own path, Shrichan. If the three things had matched as you say, there could have been a case. But they do not.

Shrichan: Then what should I do?

Vikas: For your own dignity and safety, it would be best to remain quiet. Otherwise you will have needless expenses; the crop is already lost, and you may go to jail as well.

Shrichan: (silent, shaking his head) Bhai, I have always accepted your advice, so I accept it now too. But my heart is burnt. Until I either hurl ten abuses at them, or give them ten slaps, or

send them to jail, my mind will not be at peace.

Vikas: Everything happened because of your own mistake. Hold your ears and promise yourself that you will not fall for anyone's sweet words again. This world is full of cheats, one after another. All right, tell me one thing. How did you allow yourself to be deceived so completely?

Shrichan: (with a face close to tears) Bhai, want and helplessness made my mind wander. I have two daughters. I have been thinking of marrying off the elder one for the last three years. In the third year, everything was washed away in flood, so it could not be done. The year before last there was drought, so things did not settle. This time I had thought that, somehow or other, I would marry off the girl. But even that hope has broken. You can see that people like us do not get loans from banks, and the village moneylenders have also withdrawn their support. So I had thought I would work hard in the field itself and somehow get my daughter married. That too did not happen. Now nothing comes to mind. I do not know what to do.

Vikas: Shrichan, do not lose hope. Once a man becomes poor, helplessness bites him from

every side. But what can you do? If your daughter’s marriage does not take place this year, do it next year.

Shrichan: Bhai, that is what will happen. But the women of the village keep tearing us to pieces with their tongues.

Vikas: Women speak like that. What does it cost anyone to speak? Keep courage.

Shrichan: Bhai, when I consider the circumstances, I can somehow accept the situation. But my wife keeps weeping all the time. When I see her crying, my own chest burns too.

Vikas: That is bound to happen. Have a bit of tobacco.

Shrichan: (taking tobacco and lime from his pocket and beginning to mix them) One thing I did not ask you. I remember it now. Those seed-sellers who looked so dazzling white, are people of that colour by nature, or did they have white patches on their skin? In our own village too there is one man like that. Everyone calls him the spotted one.

Vikas: In the country where those people live, it remains cold for all twelve months. There is no heat there like ours. That is why their colour becomes like that.

(Shrichan eats the tobacco and begins to leave.)

Vikas: Listen to one thing, Shrichan. Until the farmers here learn for themselves how to produce good seed, good fertiliser and good insecticides, cheats will keep coming and cheating them in this very way. It pains me to say it: our country is called a country of farmers, but the life of the farmer is worse than death. The farmer neither knows the proper method of farming, nor has farming equipment, nor any proper arrangement for irrigation. Since our region is full of streams and lowlands, even the fields are not level. In such a condition, how will people remain alive?

(Shrichan leaves. Karmanath enters and bows to Vikas.)

Vikas: Ah, son Karmanath! I am seeing you after such a long time. When did you come to the village? Is everyone in the family well? Tell me about the children.

Karmanath: Everyone is well. My eldest daughter has passed her B.A. The boy is in college, and the younger girl is studying in high school. I came to the village the day before yesterday.

Vikas: Then your daughter must now be of marriageable age?

Karmanath: Yes. Thinking of that, I have taken two months' leave and come here. But seeing the storm and turbulence here, my mind feels

anxious. My life is not like that of other salaried men.

Vikas: Son Karmanath, till now I have looked upon you like a child, and I shall continue to do so. It is good that you have said that the storm of dowry has risen in society. Since you have never handled such work before, it is natural that your mind should be anxious. But you must understand one thing: just as a storm rises in society, society itself also has the power to stop it. Ignorant, greedy and anti-social people increase it. But sensible people do not lose courage because of that. In the same field there may be thorny weeds, and there may also be good fruit trees. Society too is like that. The best of people and the worst of people live within the same society. Corrupt people sometimes marginalise the good, while at other times principled people prevail.

Karmanath: If this continues in this manner, how will society become better?

Vikas: On the basis of history till now, good people have often remained pushed back, because social power has remained in the hands of the cunning, the dishonest and the exploiters. Therefore honest, hard-working and decent people must organise themselves and confront that power. There will certainly be struggle and upheaval, but the final victory

will belong to honesty, because such people are greater in number and their work is just.

Karmanath: Then why does this still happen?

Vikas: (smiling) Though the cunning and the dishonest are fewer in number, intelligence and wealth remain in their hands. These two work as weapons. The weak and the simple, though greater in number, have remained defeated till now.

Karmanath: Let us leave that matter for now. I have come to you for a particular work; let us think about that. You are not only a teacher, but also a maker of society. My daughter belongs to the present age; she is not a worn-out piece of dead tradition. Therefore I have an unbroken faith in my heart that my daughter's marriage will certainly take place with joy and dignity. But I have lived apart from society all along, so a little worry is certainly there in my mind.

Vikas: Son, first hear why I have a difference of opinion with your father. Your great-grandfather was a well-known and respected man. Society favoured him, and the times too were like that. Just as he had wealth and property, he also had honour and prestige. When he died, the funeral feast continued for a full month. I was only a small boy then, but I remember everything. Thirty villages were

invited and fed, one village each day. People of all castes from the village were involved in that work, because the task itself was enormous. From arranging all the food items to sending invitations and feeding people, everything had to be managed.

Karmanath: (smiling) I did not know this. It is good that you told me.

Vikas: This was about fifty or fifty-five years ago. Till then, a different kind of thought prevailed in the village. People did not carry such feelings of division as they do now. In those days, people's lives too were shorter. After that, about thirty-five or forty years ago, when your grandfather died, I had already become a teacher. Ideas in society had begun to change. Your father called a meeting of society regarding the feast. I too was present. He said that the feast would be held according to the saujaniya of nine villages. Some people supported him, but some opposed him; I was among those who opposed it.

Karmanath: Why did you oppose it?

Vikas: (laughing) Our view, that is, the view of those who opposed it, was that in any feast it was not right to leave aside the people of one's own village society, including people of other castes, and invite and feed people of other villages merely because they belonged to

one's caste. If you wish to spend so much on a feast, then invite and feed the whole village. Whatever their caste may be, the people of the village are society. Society is always needed in a person's life. At times of helplessness, it is society that stands up. People from other villages merely exchange invitations to feasts. Therefore, we considered that practice wrong.

Karmanath: (nodding) That was a difference of ideas.

Vikas: Not only a difference of ideas; behind it there is a real social ground. People marry their sons and daughters into other villages. Because of that, those people become kin, not society. With them, invitations and ceremonial relations continue. But to treat the caste people of another village as one's society for eating and drinking is not right. Yes, it becomes right if, after feeding all castes of your own society, you also feed people of other villages. But society is that which remains with you from life to death. Therefore one's own village society is greater than the caste people of another village. For example, if a fire breaks out somewhere, it is the people of society, whichever caste they may belong to, who come and put it out. In the same way, if someone falls ill, or if some calamity strikes, society comes forward. This is the cause of the difference between your father and me. It is

not merely a difference. Though we are of one caste, eating and drinking between us has stopped. My society is different, and his society is different. We are only villagers of the same village.

Karmanath: Then the village has been divided into two societies?

Vikas: (firmly) Certainly. It has certainly been divided into two parts. The people of one society are joined to their village, and the people of the other society are joined to caste groups of other villages. Therefore, whenever there is any feast at your place, I do not go to eat, nor does your family come to my place.

Karmanath: This is a serious cause.

Vikas: My difficulty is this: if I go to eat at your place, my society of conviction will break. If that society of conviction breaks, I shall again be mixed into a rootless and baseless society, a society where rape is treated like a children's game, abuse is treated as a joke, and economic exploitation, that is, dishonesty with money, is treated as an old custom.

Karmanath: (nodding) Yes, that does happen.

Vikas: In my life till today I have carried out two things with resolve, and I still do. First, the question of social feasts; second, dowry in the marriages of sons and daughters, neither to take it nor to give it. It is not only I who do this.

The people of my society also do the same. Because of these two matters, you may call it misunderstanding, or faction, or two societies, but this distance between your family and me has come into being. All right, let us now come to your work. You are an officer. Then why do you wish to leave the society of officers and form a marriage relation within the village society?

Karmanath: Whether you call it the society of officers or of salaried people, it is temporary. It is like a rubber balloon: as long as air remains inside it, it flies in the sky; but the moment the air goes out, or the balloon bursts, it falls somewhere to the ground. The life of service is similar. As long as the job remains, one remains in power; once the job ends, life drifts who knows where. But social life is not like that. It is permanent. Social life is many-sided. It is like a centipede, which has hundreds of feet; even if one or two are broken, it makes little difference. There are other reasons as well.

Vikas: What other reasons?

Karmanath: People in service do not all belong to one region. Because of that, in many important matters of life, a natural oneness cannot come. Social life is the opposite. As long as I have my job, I too am away from home; but once the job ends, I shall return to the village.

Vikas: That is a very fine thought. The decline you see today in the condition of village homes, what is its cause? The cause is that educated people of the village leave the village and go away. Unless knowledge is applied to the village's resources, those resources will continue to decline. To move it forward, new knowledge is needed. The moment new knowledge begins to be used in the village, new techniques and new skills will come. New techniques and new ways will create a new human being. And when a new human being is created, a new society will stand up, one that will begin to move with the times.

Karmanath: (nodding) Hmm.

Vikas: Not only that. The priceless customs and practices of our region, Mithila, are slowly disappearing. It seems that, decreasing little by little, they may disappear altogether. People's way of life is changing, and because of that social relationships, art, culture, everything is being affected. People remain entangled day and night in tiny matters and small things in such a way that, far from moving forward, they keep sliding backwards. Because of this, the atmosphere remains polluted all the time. People remain needlessly caught in worry and tension.

Karmanath: In this direction, the intellectuals of society will have to come forward.

Vikas: Certainly. To take any society forward, or to lead it away from a wrong direction towards the right one, it is the intellectuals who can take the lead. One who has no sense of direction himself cannot move forward. Yet it is not true that all educated people possess a sense of direction. As has been said, books give knowledge, and books can also lead people towards ignorance.

Karmanath: (growing serious) I had not considered what you are saying until now.

Vikas: (smiling) Till now your attention remained within one system, and therefore you did not gain the knowledge to distinguish good from bad. A system works through conduct and practice.

Karmanath: (nodding) Then, to understand good and bad, the decision should not be made by the mind, but by conscience?

Vikas: Certainly. There is not the slightest doubt about that. The mind makes decisions according to intellect. Intellect is formed according to the system. Therefore the process by which people think and understand becomes shaped by the system. But what kind of system it is, that is the next and deeper process. Everyone wants what is good for

himself. But within that arises the question: if one's own good brings harm to another, then what? Good is truly good only when it is good for oneself and, along with oneself, good for others too. If it does not benefit another, at least it should not harm another. Yes, it is also true that some work is purely personal, with which others have no concern.

Karmanath: (letting out a long breath) Then the practice of dowry in marriage is also of that same kind?

Vikas: (smiling) Certainly. Those who take dowry are of three kinds. The first kind takes a certain amount of dowry and then boasts of having taken twice or thrice as much. The second kind takes dowry in the son's marriage, but gives less in the daughter's marriage, or even thinks of not giving any. The third kind takes dowry and still wishes to hide it. Now you tell me, why is it so?

Karmanath: How can such a tangled question be solved?

Vikas: (laughing) That is the very work I am doing in my own society. From the outside you may not see it, but within society another society is moving and taking shape. A pupil one has taught is also like a son. You are my pupil; therefore I give you my assurance. Whatever need you may have of me, I am ready for it.

Your daughter is my granddaughter too. I have known from the beginning that, unlike other salaried men, you have kept yourself away from giving and taking. You will not have to spend even a single paisa in the name of dowry. Yet this is the marriage of a son or a daughter; the customary courtesies that have come down from old times will have to be fulfilled.

Karmanath: The burden that had been weighing on me has been lifted. My mind has become light. But let me say one thing, Kaka. I am in service. I have a fixed number of days' leave, so please keep in mind that I should not have to take leave a second time.

Vikas: (nodding) I too have worked in service, so I understand the value of leave. I shall start work on this tomorrow. We shall meet again the day after tomorrow. Since your daughter is well educated, the task is somewhat more difficult. In the villages, leaving girls aside, even boys are not very educated. For a girl who has passed B.A., at least a young man with an M.A. is needed. Otherwise, one naturally looks for an engineer, a doctor, or a lawyer.

Karmanath: Now let me change the subject slightly and ask a question. Even now, and from earlier times too, I have seen that the best and most highly educated boys are married to

uneducated girls, and this is considered proper. But if a more educated girl, or an educated girl, is married to a less educated or uneducated boy, is that proper or improper?

Vikas: I shall answer that question another day. Right now my mind has become entangled in your work. ❑

Act Four

(Rambilas's house.)

Rambilas: At the age of sixty, I feel today that I have become somewhat free from worry. Not completely; a burden worth five paisa still remains. Even so, I consider myself relieved, because our forefathers used to say that once one day of Magh has passed, the whole month may be considered as good as over. By that measure, this five-paisa burden is nothing. After sixty years of being rubbed and worn down by life, the fruit that has come must surely be sweet. That is why there is happiness in my heart too.

Madhuri: If there is happiness in your heart, then dance.

Rambilas: My heart may dance within me. Am I some dancing performer that I should dance on a stage? Still, yes, one thought does rise in my mind: I should talk to you to my heart's content.

Madhuri: People rightly say, "A man's talk and a cart's wheel are much the same." Just as the wheel of a cart keeps turning, so does a man's talk. Tell me, what strange thing are you saying?

We have lived together all these years, and yet you say you never spoke to me to your heart's content!

Rambilas: (twisting his mouth) What makes you think I said it falsely?

Madhuri: What makes you think you spoke the truth?

Rambilas: Wise people say, "Men, moving forward, have become thieves, robbers, rogues and rascals, while women have remained stuck in one place like a lump of cow dung." I ask you yourself: tell me, until yesterday, when was I ever free from worry, and when did I ever sit with you and speak with a full heart, laughing and happy?

Madhuri: What great mountain were you overturning that it took you sixty years to turn it over?

Rambilas: (growing serious) You have said a very fine thing. First understand this: my life did not begin with our marriage. So let me first tell you about the time before our marriage. After that I shall speak of the time after marriage, when you were in your village and I was in mine.

Madhuri: Which village of yours was yours? I call my parents' village my own village.

Rambilas: Do you not understand even this much? A village is one's own only when one lives there. If I did not remain there, how was it my own village? You are right to call your parents'

village your own. But I was driven away from my village.

Madhuri: Who drove you away?

Rambilas: Poverty drove me away. When I was ten or twelve years old, Father fell ill. There were only three of us in the family: Mother, Father and I. At that time I was still a child, running about in nothing but a loincloth. Father's condition kept worsening day by day. Mother alone would go out for wage labour and bring something back, and she also served and nursed Father. Day and night passed in hardship. Helpless, one day she said, "Son, if you stay in the village, we shall all die for lack of grain. There is no one in the village to give work, and we have no means of earning. So go somewhere and earn."

Madhuri: Your mother herself told you to leave the village?

Rambilas: Yes. But what else could the poor woman do?

Madhuri: Where did you go alone from the village?

Rambilas: Alone? I did not go alone. People from our village and from the neighbouring villages used to go east every year to cut jute and transplant paddy. I went with them. In three days we reached Morang. At that time there was no bridge over the Kosi. We crossed by boat. A bus ran from Bhimnagar to Jogbani.

After crossing the Kosi, we caught the bus at Bathnaha, and it took us to Jogbani. From Jogbani we set out on foot for Morang. On the third day, as the sun was sinking, we reached Morang market. It was market day too. We were in the market when a Tharu man, who had come there with his wife, saw us and understood that we were people from the west. He came near and said, “O brothers from the plains, come with me.” We all set out with him. Just as we were leaving the market, he said, “Brothers, you must be hungry. Eat something first.” He bought two baskets of puffed rice and some fritters and gave them to us. We all made folds in our gamchhas, took the puffed rice, and set off eating. By the third evening we reached his place. To look at him, he seemed simple and rough, but he was a prosperous man. Eight pairs of bullocks were tied at his posts.

Madhuri: How many days did you stay with him?

Rambilas: Two months. For one month the jute work continued, and for one month paddy transplantation.

Madhuri: How did you learn the work?

Rambilas: As I saw others doing it, I too did it in the same way.

Madhuri: How much did you earn in two months?

Rambilas: Each of us received a share of one hundred and fifty rupees. Out of that I sent one hundred and twenty-five rupees home and went to Calcutta with twenty-five rupees. I reached Calcutta, but I knew no one there. After getting down at the bus stand, I went into a shop to eat. While I was eating, three or four porters came in to drink tea. They were speaking in our own tongue. I kept eating and also looking towards them. I quickly finished my food, washed my hands, paid the shopkeeper, and said to one of them, "Brother, I too have come to work. Please help me find something." They took me along with them.

Madhuri: What work did those porters do?

Rambilas: They carried sacks and all kinds of goods. I too began working with them. I stayed with them for a full year. After a year they came back to the village, and I also came. In that one year I had come to know many people. After returning to the village, I built a mud-walled room. Father's health also improved. I kept aside money for his medicine, bought grain and other things for the house, and after one and a half months I went back again.

Madhuri: Did you again begin the same porter's work?

Rambilas: Yes. I continued doing that work for five years. After that I was married to you. After

the marriage, when I was going to Calcutta, a man came and sat near me at Darbhanga with his family. He too was going to Calcutta. Up to Samastipur I sat silently, while they talked among themselves. In those days, only the small train ran up to Samastipur. From Samastipur the bigger train went to Calcutta. As Samastipur station came near, he asked me, "Son, where are you going?" I said, "Calcutta." He said, "I too am going to Calcutta. I have luggage, and I also have two children, so please help me look after the children a little at Samastipur station." I did just that.

Madhuri: The train you caught at Samastipur, did it take you straight to Calcutta, or did you have to change somewhere on the way?

Rambilas: No. We did not have to change anywhere on the way. From the train we boarded at Samastipur, he began giving me tea too. He belonged to our region. He was an engineer at the Hind Motor factory. To look at him, he seemed ordinary, but he was a living god. He said, "Son, come with me. Stay at my place, and I shall get you work in the factory." From that day I began living at his place.

Madhuri: (smiling) Till now you have spoken of your life before marriage?

Rambilas: Yes. After the marriage, you too came, and you have seen everything yourself. Once a

year I used to come on a month's leave, and during that time whatever household work had to be managed, the whole month would pass in that. Now you tell me, when did I ever become free from worry?

Madhuri: All right, now leave your tales and stories. Yesterday our son's result came out. His studies too are finished now. Arrange his marriage.

Rambilas: The same thought is in my mind. But till now you have been the guardian of the house. I spent all my life labouring outside. I did not know the bitter and sweet matters of the household. Now that I have retired and come home, if I try to lift the burden of the house, will I be able to manage it?

Madhuri: People learn work by doing it. However inexperienced you may be, you are still a man. However old and experienced I may be, I am still a woman. I can manage the work inside the house, but how will the work outside the house be managed?

Rambilas: There is truth in what you say. But now we are three people. Madan's studies too are finished, so the first thing is to arrange his marriage.

(Vikas enters.)

Rambilas: (laughing) Come, come, Master Sahib. What good fortune for me and for my family! I am

meeting you after many days. Are you keeping well?

Vikas: Yes.

Rambilas: Is everyone in your family well?

Vikas: Yes. My son teaches in a high school. I retired eight years ago.

Rambilas: (smiling) Wonderful, wonderful. Our Madan has completed his M.Com. His result came out yesterday. He passed in the first division.

(To his wife.)

Madan's Master Sahib has come without prior notice; it is our good fortune. Since Madan was taught by Master Sahib, first of all offer sweets to him.

(Madhuri goes in.)

Vikas: Where is Madan? How can I eat sweets without blessing him?

Rambilas: He went to Darbhanga by the morning train today, to meet his friends and professors. Perhaps he will return by the evening train. If he goes to watch a film with his friends, then he may come sometime tomorrow. I too retired last month. Because of Madan, all household work has been lying unsettled. As long as he was studying, how could I bring him into household responsibilities? But I am thinking that first of all I should arrange his

marriage. Even the building of the house has been postponed until now.

Vikas: Yes, yes, that is a very good thought.

Rambilas: I shall put one burden on you too, Master Sahib, because I myself do not understand the ways of the village and society. Credit must go to my wife; though she is a woman, she has managed the house till now. I spent my whole life only earning; apart from that I did nothing. The burden I place upon you is this: please arrange Madan's marriage.

Vikas: You have given me a fine burden, but...

Rambilas: But what?

Vikas: The marriage of sons and daughters has now become a business, and I feel a deep disgust for it. In seventy years of life, I have guided hundreds of marriages, but in not one of them have I engaged in giving and taking. Now tell me, am I the right person to take on this responsibility?

(Madhuri enters with sweets on a plate.)

Rambilas: Master Sahib, I have only one son. If I sell even him, then after I die who will give me a sip of water? And if a sold son does give it, how much comfort will there be in that?

Vikas: (smiling) You have said it well, but people no longer understand this. Now the fire of money has caught people's hearts. They take money itself to be religion and duty. Society has

reached a point where only those with money are respected; those without it are ignored.

Rambilas: (smiling) Master Sahib, I speak of myself. As long as I did not understand, my mind was always fixed on money. I thought of contentment as only a word. But I thank that engineer sahib who removed the veil from my eyes. Now I understand money only as a means, not as life.

Vikas: Who was that engineer?

Rambilas: His home is in our own region, but since childhood he lived in Calcutta. He studied there and also worked at Hind Motor. This is a very old matter. I too was going to Calcutta, and he too had boarded the train at Darbhanga for Calcutta. We met in the train itself. He took me with him. At first he put me to odd jobs in the house, but after a short time I too got a permanent job. He always used to say, “Rambilas, a poor man’s capital is his labour; therefore make labour your friend and walk with it.” By his grace I retired as a head mechanic. Though I was uneducated, I earned and built something.

Vikas: What did you build?

Rambilas: As my income grew, I kept increasing my small ventures. Before I had learnt the work of machines, I bought a second-hand taxi. I gave it to a driver to run at fifty rupees a day. Of my

salary, I sent half to the village and saved half. After a short time I sold the old taxi and bought a new one. Then the fare income began to increase, and in the meantime I too became a mechanic after working as a helper.

Vikas: Excellent! Then?

Rambilas: When I became a mechanic, my salary doubled. I also learnt how to repair vehicles. I worked eight hours on duty in the factory and spent the remaining time repairing market vehicles. Then I bought a third taxi. I put that too on hire. When I remember it, I laugh. Just as my heart had once burnt for money, so money began to rain down.

Vikas: Wonderful! What happened after that?

Rambilas: Seeing the income, I began to feel that I should buy land in Calcutta and build a house. But when I asked him, I mean the engineer sahib, he said, "The thought is fine, but it will be foolishness. There is no region in the world like our own. Money alone is not everything. Do not buy fields here, and do not build a house here. Yes, as long as you are in service, if you want to run some temporary business, do it. But after retirement, go back to the village."

Vikas: Why did he tell you to return to the village?

Rambilas: I too asked him that. He explained, "Look, our region is very backward in terms of

market development. In a backward region, people's income and their lives remain backward too. But no one should be frightened by that. If any region has moved forward, it is because of the labour of the people there. So if people do not work and instead abandon their own region, how will that region move forward?"

Vikas: (serious) He said a very great thing.

Rambilas: In the meantime, Madan wrote a letter saying, "Father, the National Highway is being built through our village." Since I myself do not read letters, I gave it to the engineer sahib to read. After reading the letter, he laughed to himself. He said, "Rambilas, you are a mechanic. Now Calcutta will come to your own village." I understood nothing. Then he explained, "Your job is nearly over, and a big road is being built. With dignity, sell all your vehicles here and buy a large bus. By that time your son's studies too will be over. Give the bus to your son, and you yourself buy a lathe machine and set it up by the roadside." I did not buy fields and lands. I bought only three kathas beside the house.

Vikas: That is a very fine thought.

Rambilas: Though till now all work has been delayed. I have neither built the house nor bought the bus. But I have thirty lakh rupees in hand.

With that everything will be done. I was in service and my son was still studying, so how could I do it earlier? Now the hunger for money has ended, and the way I look at the world has also changed.

Vikas: What way of looking at the world has changed?

Rambilas: Before I became a mechanic, when my income was low, whenever I saw people's show and glitter, I used to think, "What sort of God gave birth to us, that we always remain in want of everything?" But when I became a mechanic and my income increased, I began to understand that the whole world is full of poor people like me. From that, the seed of contentment began to sprout in my heart. Now that sprout has become a great tree. It has brightened my view of the world. Now I feel that the world is very beautiful.

Vikas: What is beautiful about it?

Rambilas: Now I see that the world is more beautiful than heaven, and holier and greater than thousands of pilgrimage places put together. In any shrine, only a counted number of deities dwell. But in this pilgrimage place called the world, billions upon billions of deities live. Why would anyone wish to withdraw from such a holy place? A power of resolve was born in my mind. That power of resolve changed the path of my thought.

Because of that, life has become lighter than flowers.

Vikas: That is your way of looking at the world. But what came into your own life?

Rambilas: As long as life had not changed, I understood only earning and eating. But now I have begun to understand helping others too. The labour I once sold to others, I have now begun to invest in my own work. Because of that, the slavery of the mind has vanished.

Vikas: Now let us come to our work. I have a similarly educated girl in mind. She has passed B.A. She is a storehouse of modesty, good character and virtue. She is a pure vessel of Lakshmi. Such a girl is born only in a fortunate household.

Rambilas: Master Sahib, I may certainly be Madan's father, but you are the guru who gave him knowledge. Therefore, consider Madan your own son and arrange his marriage wherever you think fit. I shall not have the slightest objection. I do not have the slightest greed for money.

Vikas: (happy within himself) Look, that girl is the daughter of a high officer. He himself is a living god. He too was taught by me, and therefore he has unbroken trust in me. Whatever I say to him, he will certainly do. But these days I see quarrels and complications

arising during loosely arranged marriage negotiations, often because of disputes among the women. If none of that happens, I shall take up this work.

Rambilas: Madan is not here just now, otherwise I would have sent him with you. Of course, I am not from the bride's side; I am from the groom's side, so how can I take the first step? But there is no harm in going to your place. Come, I shall go with you, and you may introduce me to the bride's family.

Madhuri: Master Sahib, the son is mine too, and the daughter-in-law will be mine as well. So let me also say one thing. People say the world has moved far ahead; that is good. The more the world moves forward, the more everyone will move forward. But we live in a village of Mithila, where even today people go on foot between their parents' home and their in-laws' home. They do not do it out of pleasure; they do it out of want. People in towns and cities fly in aeroplanes, while for people like us the boat is still the vehicle. So all this must be kept in mind.

Vikas: (laughing loudly) There is no need to say all this. I have already said that the girl is a vessel of Lakshmi. Lakshmi herself will enter the family.

Rambilas: Master Sahib, there should be no delay in an auspicious work. The last burden upon my

forehead will be lifted. Even the little worry that remains will disappear. So I think I should go with you at once and settle everything today. ❑

Act Five

(Vikas's darwajja. Vikas, Rambilas and three or four others are seated.)

Vikas: Radheshyam, please go and call Karmanath Babu.

(Radheshyam leaves.)

Rambilas: How far is his house from here?

Vikas: Only a short distance. He will come at once.

Rambilas: Master Sahib, now that we have come this far, let us somehow settle the matter today.

Vikas: Look, I shall certainly make every effort from my side, yet...

(Karmanath enters with Radheshyam.)

Vikas: Come, come, Karmanath Babu. I was wondering whether you were in the village or not. It is good fortune that you are here.

Karmanath: I too have just returned from my maternal uncle's place. My uncle has come with me.

Vikas: Why did you not bring him along too?

Karmanath: How could I have brought him? Radheshyam came straight and said that Vikas Kaka had called me.

Vikas: (indicating Rambilas) You probably do not know him. His home is in Sundarpur. He has a son who has passed his M.Com. this year. His result came out only yesterday. That boy too was taught by me, though I saw him only a few days ago. The boy must be a fine one.

(Karmanath smiles.)

Rambilas: Hearing the result, the boy caught the early morning train and went to meet his friends and companions. He may return by the night train. If he happens to go to watch a film with his friends, he will come tomorrow.

Vikas: Rambilasji, you too probably do not know Karmanath Babu. He is also my student. He is the jewel of our village, the village's first proud blossom. He is a senior officer. May God give such sons to everyone. He is as honest as he is highly placed. As for his gentlemanliness, there is no need even to speak of it. I too spent my whole life as a teacher, but not like the teachers of today, before whom their own students keep smoking cigarettes and bidis while the teacher sits with his head lowered. The boys of today have become such that they respect neither parents nor teachers.

Rambilas: (hurriedly bowing to Karmanath, thinking within himself that the marriage relation should somehow be settled) Master Sahib, I have already told you: Madan may be my son,

but he is your student. Therefore your right over Madan is not even a little less than mine. Parents give birth, but it is the guru who shows the path of life.

Vikas: (smiling) Since both of you are before me, I see no impropriety in speaking. Karmanath Babu, you are a learned man, and therefore it may not seem proper that I should say anything. But this is a relation between two families, so remaining silent would also not be proper.

(Both Karmanath and Rambilas burst into laughter.)

I have introduced you to each other. Now let me say one thing about the times we are living in.

Rambilas: Certainly, certainly. Please say it.

Vikas: I am speaking about the present time. Karmanath, you belong to an old landed family now in decline. Rambilasji has risen through his own labour. In social, economic and educational standing, the two of you have now reached the same level. Therefore, a relation between you is in keeping with the time. As for the boy and the girl, the social pattern that has formed here seems hollow to me. There is a custom of marrying an educated boy to an uneducated girl, and everyone considers it good and accepts it. But here a question arises: should the marriage of an educated girl with an uneducated boy be considered good or bad? In your case,

however, that question does not arise. So there is no need to say anything further on that point. Accept this as my heartfelt blessing and good wishes for both Madan and Champa.

Rambilas: (laughing) What does that mean?

Vikas: Just as your Madan has become a jewel at the level of a labouring family, so I regard Champa as a jewel at the level of women's education. Whether it is a necklace of jewels or a garland of flowers, whether it is made of one piece or a hundred, both are worn around the neck. One thread may be visible to everyone, the other may remain hidden, but both hold their place.

Rambilas: (laughing) Master Sahib, I am an uneducated man, so I may not understand everything you say. But I certainly have this faith in my heart: you will never think of anything harmful for me.

Vikas: Look, both families think alike. Therefore there is no need for further speculation. Let us now move the practical matter forward.

Karmanath: The fact that I have not seen the boy does not cause me the slightest doubt. But since we have come this far, let me call both my brothers too. Not because it is necessary to ask them, but so that they do not feel that their elder brother did not even tell them. Not

only that, I would also like them to see my daughter.

Rambilas: Today she is your daughter, and therefore the entire responsibility rests upon you. But after marriage she will be my daughter-in-law too. So now that I have come this far, I shall also bless her before I go.

Vikas: (laughing) Very good. Radheshyam, go once more to Karmanath Babu's house and call both his brothers, Lalbabu and Nunu, and bring Champa too.

(Radheshyam goes to call them.)

Karmanath: Kaka, my daughter belongs to the present age. She is not merely educated. She also knows computers. She knows all the skills needed to run a family. And her greatest quality is this: she not only knows all the customs of Mithila associated with women, but also practises them in her daily life. She is not only a capable homemaker; she also possesses the skill to stand on her own feet and live by her own ability.

Rambilas: Karmanath Babu, though I remained uneducated, I spent my life close to such a thoughtful man that I regard him as a god. He taught me the art of standing on my own feet and living. He always used to say that a labourer sells his labour to a capitalist, and that is not right. Therefore one should

constantly try to put one's own labour into one's own work. I too spent my whole life in service, because I was born into such a helpless family that there was no other way. But now I have earned enough that my family will never have to remain dependent on a job.

(Lalbabu, Nunu and Champa enter.)

Vikas: Rambilasji, this is the girl.

(Rambilas looks steadily at Champa.)

Rambilas: Master Sahib, I seek a good human being, not money. (laughing) I shall not merely give my son; I shall also bear the expense of the marriage.

Karmanath: (smiling) My brothers, I have called you, Lalbabu and Nunu, because just as she is my daughter, she is your niece. So you too should give your view.

Lalbabu and Nunu: Bhaiya, where you and Vikas Kaka are present, what can we say? What you elders approve is our approval too.

Karmanath: (to Champa) Child, touch their feet.

(First Champa touches Vikas's feet, then her father Karmanath's, and after that Rambilas's.)

Rambilas: (placing a thousand-rupee note in her hand) May God give you a long life. Master Sahib, though I am from the groom's side, I am nothing before Karmanath Babu. I thank

you, Vikas Babu, for lifting me from mud and seating me upon a throne.

Vikas: Rambilasji, I shall request both sides that the marriage be completed on the very first auspicious date.

Rambilas: There is no objection from my side.

Vikas: One more thing. These days people have developed the habit of holding marriages with great pomp and show. That should not happen. Whatever expense, whether from the bride's side or the groom's side, is wasted in empty display is useless. If that money is saved and put into some work, it will serve life. I speak from my own experience. At my marriage, only my father went as the wedding party. Even then the work was done. There is no sense in preparing kheer only to let the crows plunder it.

Rambilas: I agree with your view. Whatever Karmanath Babu says, I shall do.

Karmanath: I have no separate view. Whatever Vikas Kaka says, I shall do.

Vikas: The marriage matter is as good as settled. Now, if anyone has anything else to say, let it be said here and now.

Karmanath: In the society in which I have lived till now, I am not arranging my daughter's marriage within that society. But in that society, many relations have become tied to

giving and taking. Therefore I request that once, after the marriage, I may take my daughter along with me. She has friends and sisters there; she may meet them all. After that she will live here, and this will be her home.

Vikas: I could not quite understand your point, Karmanath Babu.

Karmanath: Kaka, in the society in which I live, that is, among officers, twenty-five or fifty occasions such as marriages, mundan ceremonies and other rites take place every year. I have also been invited to them. I only attend the feast, but at each occasion five hundred to two thousand rupees are spent. Since I am arranging my own work apart from that society, I will still have to do something in order to maintain my relations there.

Vikas: Oh! Yes, that is proper. What about you, Rambilasji? Do you also have any difficulty?

Rambilas: Yes. I too have a difficulty, but mine is of another kind.

Vikas: What is it?

Rambilas: I have already told you that only a few days ago I retired from service, and Madan was still studying. Neither father nor son was at home, and because of that all our household plans have been delayed. For example, building the house, setting up work, completing these

things will take at least six months. At present there is not even a proper house in which to live. So I too need some time. We can perform the marriage now, but as far as vidagari, the formal departure of the bride, is concerned, that should be done next year.

Vikas: What work has to be done?

Rambilas: (laughing) Master Sahib, as long as I was earning, I lived in someone else's house, and my son lived in a hostel. Only my wife remained at home. So there was neither much need for a house, nor time to build one. Now I have retired and my son has completed his studies, so both of us are free to attend to these matters. Therefore, first I have to build two places: one for living and one for business.

Vikas: What kinds of business are you thinking of?

Rambilas: First of all, I shall build a house around a courtyard. Three sides will contain living quarters, and the fourth will open onto the darwajja. After that, at the square, beside the National Highway, I shall build three rooms. In one room I shall set up a lathe machine. The second will serve as my mechanical workshop, and in the third I shall make something like an office for the boy, where he will keep the accounts of his business.

Vikas: Wonderful. That is a very fine plan. What will you do after that?

Rambilas: After building the house, both father and son will go to Calcutta. My money is in the bank there. I shall withdraw the money and, taking the engineer sahib with me, buy a bus for my son. For myself I shall buy the machine. And since the daughter-in-law has learnt computers, I shall buy a computer for her. After that, whatever money remains, and all the goods, we shall load onto the bus and bring back. All this work will take more than six months.

Vikas: There is indeed a great deal of work. Very good. If not in six months, then within a year everything will certainly be done.

Rambilas: Yes, why should it not be?

Vikas: Then both of you should complete your respective preparations during the year. Perform the marriage now, and hold the formal departure next year. But complete the ritual of duragaman as well. For now, take the bride ceremonially across the boundary and bring her back. Consider the marriage work completed.

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Glossary

Babu: A respectful form of address for a man. It is often used for an educated person, an elder, an officer, or a person of social standing. In the play, the word carries both respect and social warmth.

Batua: A traditional cloth pouch, usually tied to the waist-cord. It has small compartments for keeping money, betel ingredients, tobacco, supari, and other personal things. In rural life, a batua was not merely a pouch, but a small private store of habit, memory and everyday culture.

Bhang: An intoxicating preparation made from cannabis leaves. In parts of North India, it is used in drink or paste form, sometimes in festive, rural or informal contexts. In the play, it appears as part of changing village habits and market culture.

Bhai: Literally, brother. It may refer to one's real brother, but it is also used as an affectionate or respectful form of address for another man.

Bhaiya: Elder brother. It is also used affectionately or respectfully for a male who is older or treated with closeness.

Bidi: A small Indian hand-rolled cigarette, usually made by wrapping tobacco in a leaf. It is commonly associated with ordinary rural and working-class life.

Bigha: A traditional unit of land measurement used in North India. Its exact size varies from region to region. In the play, bigha indicates agricultural land, property and rural wealth.

Bride’s side: The family and relatives of the bride. In the marriage culture represented in the play, the bride’s side often bears social pressure and financial burden, especially in relation to dowry.

Catechu: A brown extract used in paan. It is usually applied in small quantity on betel leaf along with lime, supari and other ingredients.

Cowrie: A small shell once used as a very low-value medium of exchange. The phrase a broken cowrie means not having even the smallest amount of money.

Crore: An Indian numbering unit equal to ten million.

Darwajja: The front outer space of a Maithil rural house. It is more than an ordinary door or gate. It is the public face of the household, the place where visitors arrive, men sit, social conversations take place, and the honour of the family is seen and tested. The courtyard belongs more to the inner domestic world,

while the darwajja opens the household to society.

Duragaman: A marriage-related ritual in Mithila. After the wedding, the bride's formal departure or movement to the husband's home may take place later. In some situations, the ritual may be performed symbolically by taking the bride across the boundary and bringing her back.

Flattened rice: Rice flakes, commonly eaten in Mithila and other parts of India. In local food culture it is often known as chura or chiura.

Groom's side: The family and relatives of the groom. In the social world of the play, the groom's side often holds greater bargaining power in marriage negotiations, especially under the custom of dowry.

Guru: A teacher or preceptor. The word suggests not only one who teaches lessons, but also one who guides a person morally, socially and intellectually.

Jeth: A month in the traditional Hindu and Maithil calendar, roughly corresponding to May-June. It is usually associated with intense summer heat.

Kaka: Paternal uncle, often the father's younger brother. It is also used respectfully for an older male in the family or village circle.

Katha: A traditional unit of land measurement, smaller than a bigha. Its exact size varies by

region. In the play, the word appears in the context of agricultural land and land transactions.

Lakh: An Indian numbering unit equal to one hundred thousand.

Lakshmi: The Hindu goddess of wealth, prosperity and auspiciousness. In family speech, calling a woman a form or vessel of Lakshmi means that she is considered fortunate, virtuous and prosperity-bringing.

Lime: In the context of paan, lime means edible slaked lime, not the citrus fruit. A very small quantity is applied on betel leaf while preparing paan.

Lota: A rounded metal water vessel used in Indian households for drinking, washing, ritual purposes and everyday domestic use. In the rural world of the play, it is also linked with hospitality.

Magh: A month in the traditional Hindu and Maithil calendar, roughly corresponding to January-February. It is associated with winter and appears in local sayings and seasonal references.

Maithil: A person belonging to Mithila, or culturally connected with Mithila.

Maithili: The language of Mithila. It is spoken mainly in North Bihar and adjoining parts of Nepal.

Mithila: A historic and cultural region associated with North Bihar and adjoining parts of Nepal. In

the play, Mithila is not merely a geographical location; it represents a social world of language, memory, marriage customs, rural honour and ethical responsibility.

Mithilak Beti: The Daughter of Mithila. This is the title of the original Maithili play. Beti means daughter.

Modak: A small sweet or prepared edible item. In the play, the word appears in relation to prepared bhang products.

Mundan: A Hindu family rite in which a child's first hair is ceremonially shaved. It is one of the social and religious occasions referred to in the play.

Nana: Maternal grandfather, the father of one's mother.

Nut-cutter: A small hand tool used for cutting supari, or areca nut, into pieces.

Paan: A betel quid prepared with betel leaf, supari, lime, catechu, and sometimes tobacco or spices. It is commonly chewed after meals or during social conversation in many parts of India.

Paisa: A small unit of Indian currency, equal to one-hundredth of a rupee. In ordinary speech, paisa may also mean money in general or even the smallest amount of money.

Polythene packet: In the context of the play, this refers to a small plastic pouch containing a

drinkable intoxicant or prepared drink, not merely the plastic material itself.

Rama: A central figure of the Ramayana. The reference to Rama breaking the bow is part of the well-known story of his marriage to Sita.

Rupee: The basic unit of Indian currency.

Sahib: A respectful form of address, especially for a teacher, officer, or socially respected man. It may suggest both respect and social distance.

Sherbet: A sweet, cooling drink made with water, sugar and flavouring. In the play, offering sherbet is also an act of hospitality.

Sita: A central figure of the Ramayana, traditionally regarded as the daughter of Mithila. The play invokes Sita to recall Mithila's cultural pride and to contrast it with the present degradation caused by dowry.

Snuff: Powdered tobacco inhaled through the nose. It was commonly kept in small boxes and used by some older people in rural society.

Supari: Areca nut, commonly chewed with betel leaf in paan. It is also associated with hospitality, social exchange and ritual use in many parts of India.

Vrindavan: A sacred and poetic place associated with Krishna in Indian cultural imagination. In the dedication, Mithila's Vrindavan suggests a flowering, sacred and culturally beautiful landscape. ❑❑❑

Notes